

CALLED BY GOD: GIVEN TO THE CHURCH

Galatians 1:18-24

Even though we may be saved and called as individuals, we are never independent from the community of believers.

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Called by God: Given to the Church

Galatians 1:18-24

As we preached through the book of Amos, we spent a great deal of time trying to unlearn some of our culturally wrong thinking. In our passage this morning, we will see that we must correct our misunderstanding of individualism. You see, in the United States, one of our most cherished characteristics that we are proud of is our rugged individualism. We have grown up admiring the strong, silent types. We cheer on the rebel, we admire the individualist, and we all want to be heroes who take the path less traveled.

When we come to verses like 16-17 from last week's text, we say, "See? God created us to be individuals. Our faith is private and our expression of our faith is a private thing. We are responsible to no one but God." Since we grow up with this high view of rugged individualism, it is easy for us to get confused into thinking this way.

However, this morning's text should help us balance this view out. In many cases, God does save us and call us as individuals. However, He saves us into His family. In other words, when He adopts us into His royal family, we already have brothers and sisters. And He calls us to minister within the context of the family. In other words, we have brothers and sisters. We are responsible to cooperate with them and to work together with them. The family of God is responsible to and for one another.

The Apostle Paul often refers to the church as the Body of Christ. I really like that metaphor, but if we're not careful, we can communicate the wrong thing. Let me give you an example.

All of you know that I almost never dress up so most of the people and businesses in this area only see me in street clothes. One morning, I went for a coffee to the diner across the street. We were having a Thanksgiving service and a luncheon to follow. I had my suit and collar on. Two of the waitresses asked why I was all dressed up. I explained that we were having a celebration and invited them to come. Since their shift was almost over, they came.

The sermon was all about the Body of Christ. It focused on how we should care for one another and love one another. I made a strong point about the church not being a building, instead it is a body of believers. The waitresses must have really enjoyed it because when I went to the café for coffee on Monday morning, the one waitress excitedly shouted, "Oh Pastor John, we just loved your body!" and the other one followed it up with, "And we have never seen you with your clothes on before!"

So you can see how even when we have the best of intentions, our words can be misunderstood.

So far in his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul insisted that the Gospel message was given directly to him from the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And further, God commissioned him to offer the Gospel message to all nations. However, we must not carry this so far as to mean that Paul was allowed to operate independently of the rest of the Christian Church. The main idea of this morning's text is this.

EVEN THOUGH WE MAY BE SAVED AND CALLED AS INDIVIDUALS, WE ARE NEVER INDEPENDENT FROM THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS.

I chose the words in that sentence carefully. Notice I said, "Even though we may be saved and called as individuals." That is a very Western notion. I think that's probably how it happens in much of the world. However, there is plenty of evidence, both documented and anecdotal that in tribal societies, oftentimes whole tribes are converted at one time. In the Biblical record, we see individual conversions and family conversions.

And to carry this one step further, God gives us all spiritual gifts, talents, abilities, and resources. They are to be used in the context of the church. There have been many people who have left Christianity or who are leading defeated lives because they insist on living as individuals.

I. MEETING THE FAMILY (VS 18-19)

It Is Each Believer's Responsibility to Search Out and Join a Local Body of Believers.

In verses 18-19 Paul describes his meeting the family. For us the lesson is that it is each believer's responsibility to search out and join a local body of believers. There is a lot of talk these days about churches becoming visitor friendly. In fact, we try to do that here. In other words, we have people assigned to try and reach out to newcomers, to help them feel welcomed, and to help them get into the family. In fact, in Paul's life, Barnabas served that role. When Paul got to Jerusalem, no one wanted to have anything to do with him. They didn't trust him. But Barnabas took him around and introduced him and helped him to become part of the church family.

But make no mistake, it is each person's personal responsibility to seek out a church to become part of and it is each individual's responsibility to make friends and to get involved with the family. The best case scenario is when a person is actively trying to get to know people and the church is simultaneously reaching out to people. That would be the best-case scenario. So for those of you who have been coming here regularly, look around. If you see people you don't know or haven't met, go up to them, introduce yourselves, and make them feel welcome. For those of you who are visiting, please come up and introduce yourselves. Let us know who you are and what you are looking for.

A. LEARNING THE FAMILY STORY (18)

It seems that three years after his meeting the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem. It is his intent in verse 18 to learn the family story. Jerusalem was the center for Judaism and early Christianity. Jesus was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead in Jerusalem. At Pentecost, thousands of Jews gave their lives to Christ in faith. In other words, they professed publicly that Jesus was the Promised Jewish Messiah. The early church stayed predominantly in Jerusalem until they were forced to scatter because of persecution. For the most part, in the early days, the Apostles hung around Jerusalem and the surrounding areas in Judea and Samaria.

Paul says that he went to Jerusalem specifically to "get acquainted with" Peter. We need to comment on a couple of words here. The word "to get acquainted with" can have a very broad sense. On the one hand, it could simply mean to meet someone or to be introduced to someone. On the other hand, it could mean to learn something, to get acquainted with a school of thought, a tradition, or a school of philosophy. I think it is most certainly both. Paul wanted to meet Peter.

Now in the Greek text, Peter's original Aramaic name, Cephas is used. Cephas means *rock*. We all remember that when Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus called him *The Rock*. And Jesus went on to say that He would build His church on the Rock. Paul went to meet the Rock face to face. They spent 15 days together. In one sense, Paul wanted to meet the head of the Christian Church, but more than that, I'm sure he wanted to hear some of the stories Peter had to tell of his days with Jesus.

Paul knows Jesus primarily from his encounter with Him on the Road to Damascus, and Paul was certainly able to go back into the Hebrew Scriptures and now read Jesus back into them. In other words, Paul had a great theological knowledge of Jesus. But Peter would be able to fill in a lot of the human details of what it was like to walk, talk, and live with the earthly Jesus. I'm sure they did not spend much time talking about the Chicago Bears, Bulls, Cubs or White Sox. Paul needed to be able to fill in the details of his missing experience with Christ. And Peter needed to meet the Apostle that Jesus commissioned to reach the Gentiles.

Let me make one other aside here. In today's culture, many people use the Internet to have social contact. There are all sorts of things like chat rooms, MySpace.Com, online dating, etc. However, we are human beings. We were created for face-to-face contact. In my opinion, online dating, online social groups are at best defective, and at worst, sinful. There cannot be any real relationships taking place based online. Individuals and groups must meet face-to-face to have any real relationship. We were created to be in community.

So Paul learned the family story about all that Jesus said and did over the period of time that He spent with His disciples. It was an incredible story. And Paul had his own story to add to the family story.

B. MEETING THE FAMILY SPOKESPERSON (19)

In verse 19, Paul met the family spokesperson. Even though it seems as if Peter was the lead Apostle, it seems that James, the Lord's brother was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. If you take time to go back and read about the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, it appears that James is the one who presides over the meeting. I don't know if there is any hidden meaning in Paul's words when he makes the point that he didn't meet any other of the 12 Apostles. There are many commentators that make a great deal about this, but I can't see it. All I can see is that Paul made it his business to meet the lead Apostle, the Rock (Peter) and James, the spokesperson for the Church. Paul wanted to make sure that he communicated what had happened to him and the message he was preaching.

Even though it sounds as if Paul doesn't care about what people say, it is important that the Jerusalem Church leaders understand his calling, his mission, and the message he is preaching. Even though Paul has received direct revelation from God, he is still responsible to the rest of the church. Listen to how Paul tells the church in Corinth to handle prophesies,

²⁹ Let two or three prophesy, and let the others evaluate what is said. ³⁰ But if someone is prophesying and another person receives a revelation from the Lord, the one who is speaking must stop. ³¹ In this way, all who prophesy will have a turn to speak, one after the other, so that everyone will learn and be encouraged. ³² Remember that people who prophesy are in control of their spirit and can wait their turn. ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the other churches" (I Corinthians 14:29-33/NLT).

Our lives, our calling, and our message are all to be lived out and tested in the context of the community of believers. That is why it is each believer's responsibility to search out and join a local body of believers.

II. JOINING THE FAMILY (VS 20)

One of the Most Important Characteristics of a Healthy Family is That it Knows How to Speak the Truth in Love.

In verse 20 we see Paul joining the family. In the family of Christ, honesty is one of the most important qualities. One of the most important characteristics of a healthy family is that it knows how to speak the truth in love. That phrase *speaking the truth in love* comes from the hand of the Apostle Paul himself. Keep in mind, there are two parts to this.

A. SPEAKING THE TRUTH

Speaking the truth is more difficult than it seems. Our country is a very litigious society. From a very young age, we learn how to play with the truth. We learn to omit some of the details or embellish the details.

At any rate, our court system is designed to play with the truth. Lawyers will ask questions that are designed to get a specific answer. The person will be able to say that they didn't lie. However, the way the question was phrased was intentionally designed to bend the truth and give a very distorted meaning. Our whole legal system is designed to distort truth. Whoever has the most money can employ the cleverest lawyers. If you don't believe me, just look at some of the surveys. Poor people disproportionately end up in jail, not because they are more dishonest than rich people, but because they are able to hire very clever lawyers who will help them to twist and distort the truth.

I want to challenge each one of us to examine our words for the day. Before we go to sleep, it would be a good exercise for us to ask, "Did I leave out some details that would have made me look worse than what I was portraying? Did I embellish or stretch the truth just a bit to make me look better?"

If you take time to read through the book of Acts and all of Paul's letters in the New Testament, you can see him portray the good, the bad, and the ugly in his life. Oftentimes while defending himself he would say things like,

⁹ "I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many of the believers in Jerusalem to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. ¹¹ Many times I had them whipped in the synagogues to try to get them to curse Christ. I was so violently opposed to them that I even hounded them in distant cities of foreign lands" (Acts 26:9-11/NLT).

And one incident he could never get out of his mind was when he and others killed Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It was after this incident that while on the way to Damascus to hunt down more Christians; Jesus met Paul and changed his life forever. On his last trip to Jerusalem Paul publicly confessed,

¹⁹ " 'But Lord,' I argued, 'they certainly know that I imprisoned and beat those in every synagogue who believed on you. ²⁰ And when your witness Stephen was killed, I was standing there agreeing. I kept the coats they laid aside as they stoned him'" (9Acts 22:19-20/NLT).

During the past year, Calvin and others have preached the incident of Ananias and Sapphira. This couple pretended to be giving more money than the actually were. Their intent was to bend the truth to make themselves look important. God the Holy Spirit struck them dead on the spot.

The place to start telling the truth is when it refers to us. We should be very careful not to make ourselves look better than we actually are. It is not an easy task, but if we want to become mature Christians, we need to take a good long look at how we speak about ourselves, how we present ourselves, and how people perceive us.

Here is a good test. If in our speech we find ourselves talking about someone else's shortcomings or faults, and not much about ours, then we are definitely not telling the truth. That especially applies to us who are married. If we can think and talk about the faults of our spouse easier than we can think and talk about our own faults, then we are probably not being truthful with ourselves or with others.

However, if we meet people who never seem to have a bad word about others, but always point out their own faults, there is a good chance those persons are being honest with themselves. The old gospel song gives us a good model to guide our thoughts and words, "It's not my brother or my sister, but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

B. SPEAKING IN LOVE

The Apostle Paul never sugar coated the truth. But just learning to tell the truth is only half the command. We are to learn to tell the truth in love. Love is what preserves the unity of the family. We have all seen religious people who tell the truth, but they tell it so arrogantly and so self-righteously that no one wants to hear it. In fact, we often reject the truth when the person telling it is offensive.

Jesus told us to love God and to love one another. We have been commanded all throughout the Bible and from the lips of Jesus that the way we are to approach one another is in love. If we truly understand how much grace we have received, then we can easily extend grace to others.

I am glad we spent a lot of time in the books of I & II Peter and Amos because if we were honest with ourselves, we would have had to come to the conclusion that we are rotten through and through. There is nothing in us that hasn't been tainted and dirtied by sin. When we see how evil we actually are, it is only then that we can receive the grace of God. Once we receive God's grace, it becomes easy to extend grace to those around us. We are people who have gathered together through grace.

To be sure, we must be honest. In other words, we are called to tell one another the truth. However, we are called to do it in love. A community that operates without love deteriorates into a legalistic community. A community that operates without truth is a community that deteriorates into chaos. A community that operates without love denies the work of Christ on the cross. A community that operates without truth denies the fact that we are saturated with sin. Paul makes it clear in several of his letters. One of the most important characteristics of a healthy family is that it knows how to speak the truth in love.

III. WORKING FOR THE FAMILY (VS 21-24)

As Part of God's Royal Family, We Are Required to Work in the Family Business.

For most of human history, children used to follow in the footsteps of their parents. Children used to take over the family businesses. In verses 21-24 Paul reminds us that he is now working for the family. For us that means as part of god's royal family, we are required to work in the family business.

Jesus came to save people from spending an eternity in Hell. Jesus gave His life so that we could be saved. However, Jesus didn't die for just our sins; He died for the sins of the whole world. He came to heal the brokenhearted. We have been given the assignment of continuing on with the ministry of Jesus. We have been given the Gospel message. Listen to how Paul spelled it out for us,

¹¹ It is because we know this solemn fear of the Lord that we work so hard to persuade others. *God knows we are sincere, and I hope you know this, too. ... Since we believe that Christ died for everyone, we also believe that we have all died to the old life we used to live.* ¹⁵ *He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live to please themselves. Instead, they will live to please Christ, who died and was raised for them. ...*

¹⁷ *What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!*

¹⁸ *All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him.* ¹⁹ *For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others.* ²⁰ *We are Christ's ambassadors, and God is using us to speak to you. We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you, "Be reconciled to God!"* ²¹ *For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" (II Corinthians 5:11-21/NLT).*

Jesus was in the business of freeing people from the bondage of sin, Satan, fear, and death. That is our purpose. As part of the royal family, we must carry on the redemption work of Jesus. Our only purpose in life is to bring people to Jesus so they can be reconciled with God and become part of His family.

A. REPORTING TO WORK (21)

In verse 21, we see Paul reporting for work. Paul went to Syria and Cilicia to start his work. The capital of Syria was Damascus and there was a huge church in Antioch. In fact the church in Antioch was the church that commissioned and sent Paul and Barnabas on the mission that brought them to the churches in Galatia. Syria was located primarily where modern day Syria and Lebanon are located. Cilicia is on the southern coast of Turkey where the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea touches it. Paul's hometown of Tarsus was located in this territory. Jesus told Paul to minister to the Gentiles. Keep in mind, for Jews; Gentiles were people from every nation and ethnicity that were not Jewish. Paul traveled throughout the Greek-speaking Roman world to tell people about the wonderful love of Jesus.

B. A WORK REPORT (22-23)

In verses 22-23 Paul sends back a work report. Again, Paul doesn't embellish the truth and try to make it look like he was a famous and revered teacher. Instead he says the churches throughout Judea don't even know what he looks like. These churches in Judea were primarily Christian churches composed of Messianic Jews. For the most part, these churches were being shepherded by the 12 Apostles and leaders who came from the Jerusalem Church.

In verse 23, Paul gives his honest assessment of how he thinks they perceive him. He says that he doesn't think they know much about him or about his work. All they know is that this crazy guy who was persecuting the church, hunting down Christians, arresting them and killing them, now is a Christian himself. And not only is he a Christian, he is preaching the Gospel and trying to convert people to Christianity.

For the Apostle Paul, his life was completely changed. Again, if we are going to get close to understanding what true grace is, then we have to understand who we really are first. I have a lot of non-Christian friends who are really good guys. They love their wives and kids, they don't cheat on their wives, they are kind and generous, and they do a lot of good things. But let's think about Paul. He was a Pharisee. He gave a lot of his money to the temple, he helped a lot of poor people, he attended the synagogue regularly and was very, very religious. And I would dare say that many of us think that we are pretty good people. So how would my friends' lives change if they were converted to Christianity? They would still love their wives and kids; they would still be faithful to their wives, do many good things and be generous. So we think their lives may not change much.

However, what should happen is that from their perspective, all of life should change. In other words, they should come to realize whatever they were doing, could never make them right with God. They would come to realize that if they were trying to grade their goodness and good deeds on God's scale of righteousness, they would all be garbage.

If we are honest with ourselves, and look at how much money we give to church, how much work we do at church, how good we treat our spouses and our children, and how good we are in our neighborhoods, schools and work, and then grade them according to God's standards of righteousness, they all amount to nothing but garbage. Our basic attitude towards life should change. In other words, we should come to realize that we are estranged from God because of our evil.

It is only because Jesus chose to die for our sins that we can be in a right relationship with God. Sure, we will still give a lot of money to the church and to the poor. Sure, we will continue to be faithful to our spouses and care for our children. However, we will understand that these things have never nor can the ever make us right with God. The whole difference is that now we live our lives in gratitude. We become thankful every day that Jesus changed our eternal destinies from death to life. And because of God's love for us, that now becomes the sole motivation for all the good we do. And we never expect that anyone look at us as good because we realize that without Christ, we are completely evil.

From the outside, Paul looked just as religious. He continued to read his Bible, give money, and do all sorts of religious things. But from the time he met Jesus face to face, he never again thought of himself as good, or righteous, or holy except through the finished work of Jesus on his behalf.

C. REPORTING TO THE FAMILY'S HEAD (24)

In verse 24, we see that the family's business is all based on reporting to the family's Head. In one of my accountability groups, we did a study on joy. What we found is that we become a source of joy to others as we obey Christ. Because Paul was now obeying Christ, he became a source of joy to the Christians in Judea.

As you and I submit ourselves to God by obeying Him, we become a great source of joy to one another. Remember, we are family and we are connected. Contrary to the American approach to life, our actions do not only affect us as individuals. The Bible is clear that my sin and my rebellion affect the whole church. If I willfully disobey God, you suffer. If you willfully disobey God, I suffer.

On the other hand, if I obey God, not only do I benefit, but you benefit. If you obey God, not only do you benefit, I benefit as well. We are connected. We are all in the family business. When I enjoy success, you enjoy success. When you enjoy success, I enjoy success. We are a family untied together with God as our Father, with Jesus as our Head, and with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit bonding us together. As part of God's royal family, we are required to work in the family business.

I love talking about grace. It makes up for every deficit I have in life. Every night before I go to bed, I think about the day. I am so glad for grace because I can clearly see that had it not been for the blood of Jesus, I could never be right with God. But the fact is that we can be right with God by looking for Jesus to forgive us of all our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Jesus makes up for all my sins of commission and omission.

But it doesn't stop there. It is not just about me. It is not just about you. The truth is this. Even though we may be saved and called as individuals, we are never independent from the community of believers.

Listen. We are all here to mind the family store. We must be useful. In his book *The Pursuit of Excellence*¹, Ted Engstrom writes:

"I was cleaning out a desk drawer when I found a flashlight I hadn't used in over a year. I flipped the switch but wasn't surprised when it gave no light. I unscrewed it and shook it to get the batteries out, but they wouldn't budge.

Finally, after some effort, they came loose. What a mess! Battery acid had corroded the entire inside of the flashlight. The batteries were new when I'd put them in, and I'd stored them in a safe, warm place. But there was one problem. Those batteries weren't made to be warm and comfortable. They were designed to be turned on – to be used.

It's the same with us. We weren't created to be warm, safe, and comfortable. You and I were made to be "turned on" – to put our love to work, to apply our patience in difficult, trying situations – to let our light shine."

Let's keep in mind that if we are truly believers, then we belong to a family. We belong to God and we belong to one another. We can either be a source of joy to God and to one another, or we can be a source of pain and disappointment to God and to one another. There are no rugged individualists in the family of God.

¹ The Pursuit of Excellence, Copyright 1982 by The Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan