

25 February 2018

**The Theology of Play**  
Galatians 2:23-28; 5:1

On his first missionary journey, Paul had preached his radical good news in the region called “Galatia” and had started several churches there. Years later, hearing that other teachers had visited those same churches, teaching that Christians were still subject to the Jewish law, Paul wrote the letter called Galatians. We read first verses 23-28 of chapter 3, then the first verse of chapter 5:

*<sup>23</sup> Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup>Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup>for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>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.*

Then, in 5:1 we read this:

*<sup>1</sup>For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

This Lent, recognizing that the Church of Jesus Christ has often taken itself *way* too seriously – confusing “important” with “serious” – I am suggesting we need to restore to the church some of the playfulness that is evident in Christ. In short, I’m calling on us to lighten up. Not always. I don’t mean to make light of genuinely grave matters. I just mean that we could stop – what the opposite of “making light”? – stop making *heavy* of playful things. And as I continue this discussion, today I want to talk about the theology that supports this call to lighten up.

And just like that, I ruined it, didn’t I? I said the word “theology” and snuffed out the last hope of playfulness. There’s just something about that word “theology” that calls to mind long, crushingly dull, minutely detailed elaborations of ideas that only matter to theologians, expressed in words that only they understand. And that’s a shame. At heart, the goal of theology is – or is supposed to be – to make things clear. It’s to work through the wildly divergent ideas found in our Bible and experienced in our faith and to put them together in a way that makes sense. Theology is supposed to clarify, which is why it’s so sad that it’s earned a reputation for doing the exact opposite. But the goal is still valid, so I want to give it a shot, looking at one of the only three or four books in all scripture that might be classified as theological writing: Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

Here’s the background. Paul had grown up a devout Jew, a member of the most rigorous sect of the Jewish faith. He was a Pharisee, which literally means “pure one,” so today we might call him a Puritan. These first century Puritans were all about keeping God’s laws, down to the tiniest detail. In fact, where the law wasn’t entirely clear, they wrote their own books of additional laws and kept those, too. They called these supplementary books the “Traditions of the

Elders,” but today we might call them the *Book of Discipline*. Now these Puritans were constantly frustrated with Jesus, partly because he kept breaking the rules of the *Book of Discipline* but even more because when he did it, he laughed. Puritans, like Boggarts in the Harry Potter books, do not like to be laughed at. Anyway, Paul was a member of that group. In fact, he was top of his class in Puritan school, with a major in persecution, so when he graduated he immediately got a good job throwing Christians in jail. He excelled in his new career.

But then Paul met the Risen Christ in a life-changing vision on the road to Damascus. He gave up persecuting Christians and, as he says in Galatians 1, went to Arabia for three years. I would love to know what happened in Arabia during those years. Some of Paul’s later writings refer to ecstatic visions of heaven and direct revelations from Jesus Christ, but we don’t know any details. What we know is that Paul became a different person. Here’s what the former Puritan came back from Arabia teaching: “It’s not about rules. I used to think pleasing God meant following the rules, so I followed them better than anyone. But it was worthless. The rules didn’t lead me to God. They were worse than worthless. They were —” And here Paul used a coarse Greek word that refers to cattle droppings. There’s a similar English word. Maybe you know it. Anyway, that’s what Paul said following the rules was. He went on, “It’s just about trusting in God. Trust that God loves you, has forgiven you, adopted you, and made you heir to all heaven’s treasures through Jesus Christ. Just because. You didn’t earn this. You couldn’t have earned it if you’d tried. God just loves you, and adopted you as children as a gift. It’s free.”

Free. Do you understand how revolutionary this teaching is, not just for a former Puritan but for everyone? We’re used to religion being about rules; that’s how we know we’re religious. If God’s acceptance is granted regardless of whether we have followed the rules, if even being a Puritan doesn’t help, that means that there’s no way to be sure. All the very best things we’ve done – all our volunteering in the community, our faithful church attendance, our years teaching Sunday School – none of that is enough to distinguish us from anyone else. But it doesn’t matter. God’s acceptance and love is unconditional. God’s forgiveness extends to all our sins, great or small. All we have to do is to trust that that’s so. Paul would add one more thing to this teaching, a couple of years later: that this free gift and freedom from bondage to rules was also extended to non-Jews. After all, if grace meant that Puritans were no better than anyone else, then it also meant that Jews were no better than anyone else. This is good news that Paul took out to preach in the region called Galatia and that was embraced by the churches he started there.

But here’s the problem. Freedom is scary. Freedom to choose your own path sometimes means not being able to. Being set free from rules is great until you try to live without them. Rules are actually pretty comforting. They provide certainty, and as I said earlier, give us standards by which we can measure ourselves. You see, that’s how we humans generally determine if we’re good: by comparing ourselves with others. Paul’s good news took that away: we were all alike in God’s eyes, none of us better than anyone else. And in the end, the Galatians had trouble with that. So do we. Our self-esteem is based on being smarter than someone else, stronger than someone else, prettier than someone else, and if we don’t have any of that, then more white or male than someone else. Yes, it is this human tendency to set up comparisons that lies behind much of the evil we do. It is a source of racism (those people are lesser forms of humanity than we are), of sexism (women just aren’t equipped for leadership roles), of social and intellectual snobbery (those ignorant yokels / those pompous elites). Behind all these is the desire to elevate ourselves by demeaning someone else. Apply that to religion, and it’s about being more moral, more virtuous, more pious than someone else. In short, it’s about . . . following

rules. *That's* what makes us feel “saved” – not Paul’s undeserved grace. So, when those Jewish Christians from Jerusalem came to the Galatian churches teaching, “But of *course* you still have to follow the rules,” many of the Galatians were ready for them.

That’s when Paul wrote the verses we read earlier. *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* And he repeated for them our equality under God’s grace: *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.* You were set free, he says. Why are you crawling back to the chains?

Paul gets a little heated in Galatians, but from the perspective of history, we can see that he’s fighting an endless battle, at least in this life, because the same cycle has occurred over and over in the church. A prophet, say a Luther, reminds us that we are not bound by rules, and we rejoice, and then a few years later we write a new bunch of rules because, face it, freedom scares us. Without rules, we don’t know what to do, or who we are. It happens over and over.

So let me offer a path through this impasse – which I believe is what Paul means as well. Christ’s freedom does not take away all rules; it just takes away our bondage to rules imposed on us by other people, institutions, and theologians. We still have rules, but *not all rules are alike*. Let me illustrate. Imagine a group of fifth grade boys in a classroom: restless, bored, chafing under the school’s rules. Raise your hand to speak. No gum. No slouching. Don’t look out the window. Phones in your backpack. Finally, school lets out and the boys burst out and race home to get their baseball stuff and meet back at the school yard to play baseball. What’s the first thing that they do before they start? They agree on the rules. Yes, you can have ghost runners, but they can’t steal bases. A home run is any hit past the volleyball net. Tie goes to the runner. Cletus, who’s already almost six feet tall, has to bat one-handed. Notice several things. First, the boys have been set free, but *they still have rules*. We need rules. Without them, we don’t know what we’re doing. But second, these rules are different, aren’t they? These rules are agreed on together, by people with a common purpose, based on shared principles like justice (Cletus has to be handicapped somehow), and entered into by common agreement by people expecting to have a great time. The school rules are intended to stop people from doing things that are bad; the baseball rules are intended to enable people to do something good.

I think that’s what Paul is saying about the Christian faith. We are no longer chained to the rules in somebody else’s book, rules designed to stop us from being bad. Instead, we have a new set of rules that begin with accepting Christ’s love, and are designed to help us live in that love. These rules are not shouldered as a duty but eagerly adopted as necessary for the grand and glorious game that Jesus began, a game that everyone plays together, and at which everyone can find joy. And what are the rules of our new game? We find those in Galatians, too, in chapter 5. Paul calls them the fruit of the Spirit. These are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you do that stuff, you’re keeping every rule that matters. And, best of all, it’ll be fun.