

Luke 8:26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.

Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.

Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing? If it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’, so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.’ For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

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.

Our Epistle lesson this morning is intimidating at first glance. Law? Spirit? Flesh? Justification? Faith? That is a lot to take in. Paul is clearly angry with the people to whom he is writing, but it's not immediately clear why. You have to remember that Paul is a Pharisee and a lawyer. He is writing to a congregation that he personally founded in central Turkey, so there's a lot of context here that he doesn't say.

So, let me tell you a story, put it all in context. I'm going to paint in very broad strokes here, and skip some stuff to give you the big picture, but I hope it's a familiar picture.

Way back when, God created the Heavens and the Earth. God created two human beings, and put them in a beautiful garden. God wanted to live in relationship with them, and they in relationship with God. God believed that being in constant relationship with God and with each other would mean that they would only need one rule. God kept God's promises, but the people did the one thing that God had told them not to do. So, God sent them out of the Garden.

God tried again.

Way back when, still in Genesis, God called a man named Abram and a woman named Sarai to leave their home, and go into a new land that God would show them. God wanted to live in relationship with them, and they in relationship with God. God promised this old, childless couple that they would have children. Abraham had to be circumcised, and they had to avoid worshipping other tribal gods. God kept God's promises, and so did Abraham and Sarah, mostly, but their descendants were a mixed bag. Esau was a brute, Jacob was a swindler, and Jacob's sons sold their brother into slavery.

God tried again.

A few generations later, God brought a rag-tag collection of tribes out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. God wanted to live in relationship with them, and they in relationship with God. This time, God gave the people explicit rules, carved in stone tablets, in hopes that they would define this relationship and keep things from going so far off the rails.

God gave the people the Ten Commandments, and a whole system of laws. Six hundred and thirteen separate commandments. That sounds like a lot. It sounds at first like the infamous “Roommate Agreement” that Sheldon Cooper required on the television show *The Big Bang Theory*, that detailed in a contract everything from thermostat settings to who would sit where in the living room.

But God knew what God was doing. When you are raising children, they are concrete thinkers. Every situation is different. They don’t generalize from one situation to another, or, if they do, they do so in odd ways. They don’t really get general principles like, “love your neighbor as yourself,” so you give them lots of rules to get them into the right habits, and you hope that they eventually figure out the principles behind what they are doing. That’s called “parenting,” and “growing up.”

The Hebrew people didn’t really get the general principle that they were supposed to be different from the other people around them, so God gave them very specific rules about what fabrics they could wear and what they could eat, to make sure they looked and acted different. They didn’t really get the general principle that they were supposed to love their neighbors, so God gave them very specific rules about charity and leaving room for gleaners and treating foreigners just like their own citizens. You could look it up.

The Law was incredibly generous for its time. Even the most notorious things in the Law today had their purpose then. An eye for an eye was a limit on violence – you could not take more than an eye for an eye. Forcing a rapist to marry his victim meant that, instead of throwing her away, he was forced to support her for the rest of her life. We do better now, and going back to those rules now would be going backward, but this was progress for the time.

Paul’s point is the difference between the Law and the Roommate Agreement. The Roommate Agreement is about the rules, but the Law is a set of rules for children, intended to teach the children the principles for life in relationship with God. The prophet Micah summed up those principles in three commands: “Do justice; love kindness; walk humbly with your God.”¹

Jesus summed up the principles in two. You may have heard them somewhere before. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”²

The whole Law was created to help God’s people learn these principles. Paul says that the law was our “disciplinarian until Christ came.” That word that is translated “disciplinarian,” refers to a slave in a Roman household whose duty it was to supervise the behavior of the family’s boys and to make certain that they got to school on time. The slave enforced household rules as rigidly as possible, as they believed was necessary to raise boys.

The Law did not completely work. The Hebrew people worshipped other gods. The rich and powerful exploited the poor and the foreigner, the widow and the orphan. Prophets seemed to be limited to influencing about two generations of people.

¹ Micah 6:8

² Matthew 22:34-40.

Entire books of the Old Testament can be summarized this way: a good king comes along, does good things, and gets the people into shape. God rewards this good king. But the king's descendants, "do what is evil in the sight of the Lord." Lather, rinse, repeat.

The Hebrew people were conquered multiple times. They were exiled in two different batches. Each time they got their act together for a while, but not forever.

God tried again.

God came down here himself. Jesus Christ was born and walked the earth with us and lived and died and was resurrected to show us just how much God loves us, and what living in relationship with God would look like. Jesus did not abolish the Law, but fulfilled it. He showed us what the Law was for.

Paul goes on from explaining the Law. "Now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian." The expectations of us are higher. As baptized members of God's family, the Church, we are the children of God.

Think about that for a minute. God, who created everything that there is, knows you. And loves you as God's child. Not because you deserve it, but because God loves you.

And God loves all the other people, too.

The pastor and writer Rob Bell put it this way: "Gospel is the announcement of who God insists you are. You're a child of God, not because of how great you are but because God has all kinds of kids and you're one of them."³

³ Rob Bell, *What is the Bible?* (2017).

But there were expectations attached to being your parents' kid. If you have kids, I'm sure that there were and are expectations attached to being your kid. There are some expectations attached to being God's kid.

Just like you hope and expect that your kid will follow your principles even after they move out on their own, God hopes and expects that we will follow the principles behind God's Law even in situations that the Law does not specifically cover.

In 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." Jewish Christians are not better than Gentile Christians. Free people are not better than slaves. Men are not better or more important than women.

We put on Christ in our baptism, and that is more important than any other piece of our identity, even the pieces we did not choose, but were born with.

White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Arab, mixed-race.

Male, female, both, neither.

Straight, gay, lesbian, none of the above.

American citizen, foreigner, refugee, none of the above.

None of that changes that we are a beloved child of God.

None of that changes that someone else is a beloved child of God.

Whenever we act like that is not true, we deny Christ.

Whenever we refuse to recognize Christ in our fellow human being, whoever they are, we deny Christ.

When we want to go back to a rigid Law defining our relationships instead of love, we deny Christ. There were some people in Galatia who wanted to go back to the Law, because it made them righteous and other people sinful, and it limited their obligations to people they called sinful. This is why Paul was angry, and why he wrote this letter. These people were going backwards, and, in the process, denying Christ.

The takeaway for us, as children of God, is this: God's Law is important. But it is a teaching tool for us. It teaches us the principles of being in proper relationship with God and with God's other Children. Those principles are more important than the Law.

Those principles are to love God with everything we have, and to love all our fellow human beings like we love ourselves. If we do that, we will do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with our beloved God.

In our world today, this is a subversive way to live, but it is the only way to live worth living. Thanks be to God.

AMEN.