

# BECOMING TOGETHER:

Toward The  
Beloved  
Community

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A WALK THROUGH GALATIANS AND ANTI-RACISM



**Session 2**

# INTRODUCTION

Last week, we focused a lot on context; the context of the Galatians and the context of our society rooted in white normativity. We also discussed our experiences and our place in this context of Canada.

Today, I want to delve into the message and thoughts of St. Paul. What was going on in his mind? What was he trying to say? I want to relate that to our current context in Toronto.

Today I want us to explore some concrete examples of how race plays out in our geographic context and relate this to Paul's story and message.

My hope is that by delving into Galatians and examining our geographic context, we will raise some critical questions about what faith means in our concrete context, and about our calling as both individuals and as a church.

# PAUL'S PRIOR MOTIVATION



Paul, if anything, was a very serious man. He took life seriously and for him, as a devoted Jew, he took most seriously living a life worthy of God's favour. His innermost earnest desire was to live a good life that God would look upon with approval. He adopted the Jewish belief that God's favour was bestowed upon the righteous. For him, as well as many other Jews, righteousness belonged to those who obeyed and followed God's law (the Torah) with their whole being.

**PSALM 119:1-3 REFLECTS THIS DESIRE FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS:**

*“Happy are those whose way is  
blameless, who walk in the law of the  
Lord. Happy are those who keep his  
decrees, who seek him with their  
whole heart, who also do no wrong.”*

**PAUL INTERNALIZED THIS MOTTO WITH HIS  
WHOLE HEART. THIS IS WHAT HE SAYS IN  
GALATIANS 1:14:**

*“I advanced in Judaism beyond many  
among my people of the same age,  
for I was far more zealous for the  
traditions of my ancestors.”*

PAUL BELIEVED HE WAS RIGHTEOUS BECAUSE OF THIS ZEAL AND BASED ON HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE LAW, HE PERSECUTED THE CHURCH:

*“I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13).*

He truly believed that this church was distorting the law of God, going against all that he believed. There were two possible reasons for this.

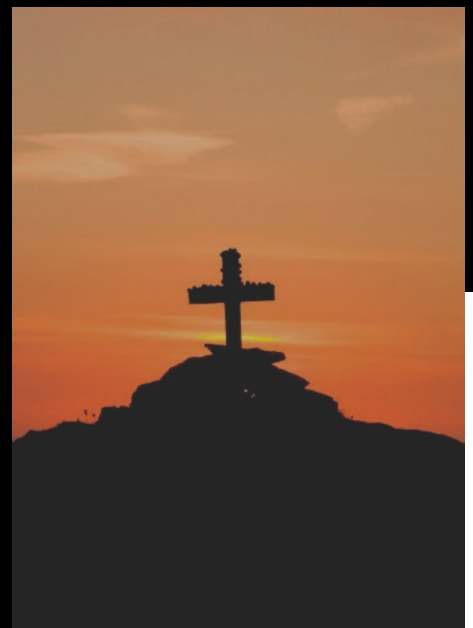
The first was that worshiping someone who was crucified and hung as a criminal was a grotesque affront to the Jewish law. No one who was killed in this manner could be the Messiah.

The second reason was the openness of the church to Gentiles, and in particular, welcoming them without requiring them to become full Jews. This went against the very grain of the Jewish people who were people chosen and set apart by God.



## WHAT WAS THE REVELATION?

Even those who were deemed unrighteous in terms of the law, were now granted God's favour.



But somewhere along the line, on the road to Damascus, Paul had a life-changing encounter. In the book of Acts, he calls it a revelation from God. And from this revelation he received this gospel:

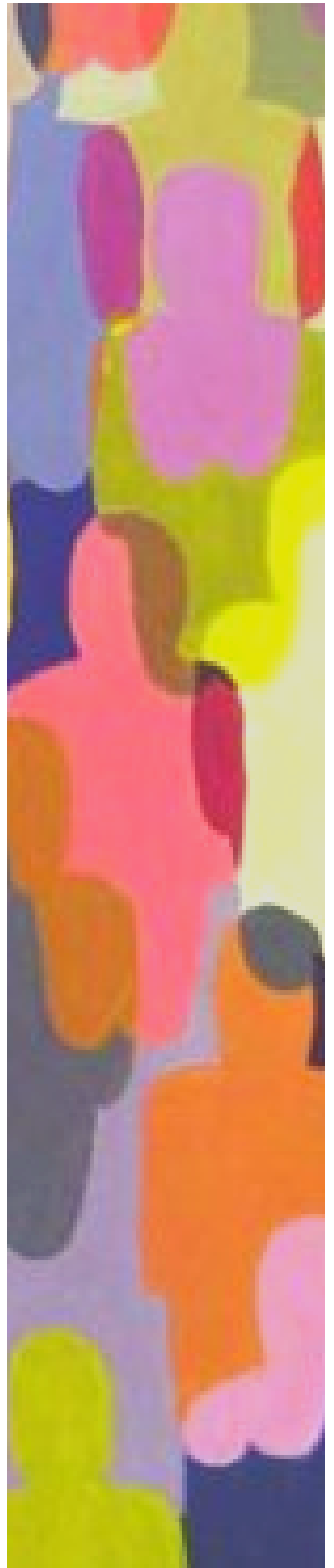
*“For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ”  
(Galatians 1:11-12).*

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***"But when God... was pleased  
to reveal his Son to me..."  
(Galatians 1:15-16)***

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This revelation shattered his belief system, it fundamentally altered how he saw things, and it completely changed his life. What was this revelation? The revelation was that God does not grant favour to those deemed righteous by the Jewish law that he had dedicated himself to. But rather, that God's favour was granted to all regardless of the worth of that person. In other words, even those who were deemed unrighteous in terms of the law were now granted God's favour.



# EXCURSUS: GIFT LANGUAGE IN PAUL



Paul's letters are replete with language associated with "gift". The most common word is grace - or "Karis" in Greek.

Grace is one word to describe the language of gifts.

However, our contemporary, western conception of a gift is quite different from how it was conceived of for Paul back then.

We think of gifts as something we give to someone else without any strings attached, expecting nothing in return. It's when I give you something without any expectation of something in return. I think we value this kind of gift that has no agenda or ulterior motive.



Charity is similar to that, people who donate want to give without expectation of anything in return. That is not all bad, but it's a one-way stream with no expectation of anything else.

But the gift language of Paul had a different idea: grace was not a gift given freely with no expectation in return. A gift was given for the purpose of building a relationship with the recipient. The gift itself might be way bigger than what the recipient could return, but that was not the point: a gift was given to build a relationship with the recipient.

For Paul, the revelation was that God was giving this gift of his favour, of his very being in his Son Jesus Christ, without regard to the worthiness of the recipient. That was such a radical breakthrough for him.

Even in our time, when we think of someone receiving a gift or favour, we think it should go to those who deserve it.

## GOD'S GIFT



What Paul realized was that God wanted to give the gift of his favour for the sake of building that relationship with us, regardless of our worth or how much we deserved it. In short, one's righteousness under the law made no difference to God. In this sense, God's gift was so disproportionate and bigger than the worth of the recipient. But that's how much God wanted this relationship with all people.

This desire was demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This revelation shattered all of Paul's previous beliefs about what it took to gain God's favour.

# REORIENTATION OF PAUL'S LIFE



## REORIENTATION OF PAUL'S LIFE

Paul saw how blinded he had been by his attachment to Jewish norms of worth.

He also saw how much harm this zealous but sincere belief had done. He realized that any human criteria of worth, whether Jewish or other, has been deprioritized to God's gift that is given regardless of one's worth.

God loved him and gave himself for him despite the harm he had done. What mattered now was not what any human individual, community or system deemed as worthy: all that mattered was God's gift.

God's grace was given without regard to one's worth. In fact, one was to die to those criteria of worth, to let them be crucified so that one could now live in deep relationship with the one who had given this gift of favour and new life.

This was the new life and the new creation: to live in deep union with the one who had given the gift of life to him without regard for his worth.

This new life in Christ was to be the ground and foundation of his whole being. His whole life was to take shape and be shaped by the life and character of Christ. His whole being would be oriented to Christ, and his faith and trust would be in Christ. This whole motif of "in Christ" would come to dominate Paul's thinking. In Christ, he found his freedom from other criteria of worth, and in freedom, he became a "slave" to Christ.

# PAUL'S NEW CALLING IN CHRIST

This new life in Christ had enormous implications for his life and his calling.



Paul first experienced awe and gratitude for this grace that was given without regard to his worth. In fact, he considered himself the greatest of sinners because he had inflicted so much harm on others based on his blindness to his own ideology.

He experienced the transformation that comes from forgiveness, from a word of gentleness, when one says “it’s okay, I still love you and give myself for you.” Paul had now found his healing, peace and joy. In the gift of this relationship with Christ, he became transformed by this love.

That experience of God's love changed his outlook, and from this love, he felt his calling: In Galatians 1:15-16, *"But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles..."*, Paul now realized that God's favour - through the death and resurrection of Christ, was now available to everyone, not only the Jews.

Whether they were Jews or not Jews did not matter. This realization changed his calling. He felt an urgent desire and need to proclaim the message of God's love to everyone so that others too could experience God's favour and this gift of relationship.

Paul's experience of the good news came to him as a revelation from God. This revelation transformed Paul as a person, and it also gave him his calling. I wonder how many of us have experienced this in our lives? Through this revelation, faith and his calling became real things. Are they real for us?

# REAL LIFE IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR PAUL

How did Paul's transformation play out in his life, and what lessons can we draw from it?

Move Away from  
Jerusalem-Centred  
Norms to a New  
Normativity



After Paul received his revelation and calling to proclaim Christ among the Gentiles, he did an interesting thing.

*This is what he says: “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus” (Galatians 1:16-17).*

At this time, the church was still quite young. The original disciples of Jesus were still alive and centred in Jerusalem. They were the acknowledged pillars of the church. They were giants, revered, and they were all thoroughly Jewish. All of the authority among followers of Jesus was centred in Jerusalem. All the norms of Christian practice emanated from Jerusalem.

But Paul did not go to Jerusalem. He went straight into the Gentile regions where there were no established norms for Christian thought and practice. He went solely with the good news that in Christ, all could receive God's grace, without regard to their worth. They did not need to be Jews or of any certain moral character, they could all receive this gift of God's grace and enter into a relationship with him.

These Gentile regions were the margins of the new community of followers of Jesus. It was in these marginal regions where Paul's theology and practice of communal life took shape. His thinking and theology expanded beyond just Jewish thinking. In his interactions, sharing life together and struggling with them, Paul built communities built on new norms: the norm of a life where all receive God's grace without regard to their worth.

For 17 years he spent time in these Gentile areas. He did not defer to any human norms that were being built in Jerusalem. Without all that time spent with the Gentiles, I don't think Christian thinking would have expanded much beyond its Jewish roots. Those in Jerusalem eventually agreed that God's favour in Christ is given to all without regard for worth, they don't need to abide by pre-existent norms (ie. circumcision).



## From Jewish Norms to Christ- Centered Norms

That agreement, or compromise, was quite tenuous, however. When Peter went up to Antioch, which was Paul's base of operations, there was a mixed Jewish-Gentile community that Peter used to eat with. Peter relinquished his Jewish norms of belief and behaviour for the sake of unity and community with the Gentiles. He did not require them to be like Jews nor to become Jews.

But rather, in Christ they could be themselves because in Christ there were no human-imposed norms. The other Jews there followed Peter's lead. But some people came from a more conservative faction from Jerusalem. They held onto Jewish norms and for Paul, that was okay.

For him, holding to Jewish norms in and of itself was fine, but when they became a source of division in the community, Paul got very angry. What Peter felt pressured into was to go back to Jewish norms, which meant to separate himself from the Gentiles. The other Jews followed his lead and there was division.

This is how Paul recounts it: "... until certain people came from James (in Jerusalem), he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction" (Galatians 2:12).

# THE FEAR OF DIFFERENCE

They drew back and kept themselves separate for fear. There is something about difference that instills fear in us.

The fear of difference can be due to different norms, images of different values or different lifestyles. Difference is often portrayed or considered negative or dangerous. We often have fear of “the other”, we fear the unknown.

*Isn't that really the issue at stake here?*

What the circumcision faction was really saying is that to be a part of this community, you have to become like us, you have to become us. You have to adapt our norms, our customs, our beliefs to fit in and then we can get rid of our fear.

Their belief was that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, in accordance with their scriptures and the law. He was a continuation. Therefore to believe in Jesus was to be a Jew, just with the unique belief that he was the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for.

To this, Paul was saying that the path to God's favour and God's righteousness was not through the norms of Jewish law, but through Christ who gave himself regardless of what norms or customs or beliefs people had. It was to be oriented toward this Christ that would lead one to receive the gift of God's righteousness and relationship. Faith was the sign of this life that was oriented to Christ.

*Paul was saying that his old norms were now laid to rest: "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is 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" (Galatians 2:19-20).*



As we will see in the next chapters, because of Christ who gave himself for all people without regard to their worth, all human norms were now secondary to life and community-oriented in the love of God shown through Christ.



How are our cultural and societal norms shaped? Who shapes them? What is the source of our own cultural and societal norms? We discussed the concept of white normativity last week. Has that affected the lives of different groups? If so, how? And what does Paul's message have to say to us?

There has been increasing inequality in the City of Toronto. There has been a hollowing out of the middle class. There is intensified racial segregation in housing and where people live.



## RESIDENTIAL PATTERNS & SEGREGATION

### IMPLICATIONS FOR RACIALIZED TORONTO



God expects those who receive God's gift to come into a relationship with God, that is the essence of God. Jesus was called "Emmanuel", which means "God is with us" in Hebrew. The essence of Jesus Christ is God with us. When our lives are incorporated into Christ (when we live in Christ), then we become God with others. And in particular, God with those on the margins, those who are left out. As people who live in Christ, who are we called to be with? Whom have we been avoiding, individually and collectively?

In the Gospel of Luke, a lawyer wanted to challenge Jesus by asking how to get eternal life. Jesus asked him what the most important commandment was. The lawyer responded by saying “Love the Lord your God ..... And love your neighbour as yourself.”

But he got smart and asked Jesus: “well who is my neighbour?” Jesus then told the story of the Good Samaritan. He then asked, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer answered, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

A neighbour is those who are WITH those on the margins, on the fringes. So instead of just “who is our neighbour”, the real question is: **who are we neighbours to?**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the norms or criteria of worth by which I've lived?
2. Have I ever experienced a revelation from God about God's gift of love given to me without regard for my worth?
3. If so, how has that affected my life, my outlook and even my sense of calling?
4. What do the facts on the slides tell us about the norms we follow and the choices we make? Whom have we deemed worthy to be with?
5. What effects have our choices made on groups we consider the Other?
6. As people who live in Christ, who are we called to be with? Whom have we been avoiding, individually and collectively?
7. Who are we neighbours to?