

Sermon Text: Galatians 6:1-6, 7-16

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My theme is the theme that is throughout the reading from Galatians and throughout the whole book of Galatians. Law and grace.

I think that many of you know, and I've mentioned that my father is very ill, and my siblings and I have been sharing stories. You know how that goes. You start remembering things as a person's life dwindles down. Sometimes you remember funny stories. I remember one time my father caught me and one of my brothers fighting, and he decided to let us decide how to punish each other. We thought, "This is great!" Dad left the room, and we talked it out, and we made a deal. The letter of the law was that you two need to punish each other for fighting, and we both decided that grace was more in order for the likes of us. Each of us promised that we would grab the belt, and we would give each other a light couple of licks and call it quits. That way we would fulfill the law of punishment and also show grace. Now, you can guess how that went. I hit him once. He hit me harder, I thought. So my second lick was harder still, and the next thing I knew, we were wailing the tar out of each other with belts until we had to stop and catch our breaths. I don't know if that was Dad's plan or not. We wanted grace for ourselves, but the law for the other.

We all tend to do that. Now, if I speak in these terms, theologically and philosophically and generally, you would all be snoring in a very few minutes. If I make it too personal, you all might be angry in a very few minutes. I think I'm going to go for personal and plain, but give you the benefit of the doubt that you are really listening and hope you will give me the benefit of the doubt that I am indeed preaching, and not merely seeking to gore your ox. Then I thought about it, and then I said, you know, gore your ox is not something everybody understands. If you don't know what that means, ox goring means that when someone else's sacred cows are melted down, you don't mind, but when it's your own sacred cow, well, that's just wrong! Now, I've explained one metaphor with another metaphor, and I'm going to leave the sacred cows hanging and hope you're with me.

From time to time, you see a story in the paper about an outspoken gun control advocate, who it turns out, when a burglar comes in their house, not only owns a gun, but is willing to use it! That's law for you, but grace for me. From time to time, you will see someone who has swindled a business or swindled the government out of a huge amount of owed tax money, and you wish them many years in prison. That's law for them, but as you do your own taxes, if you could interpret the law one way or the other, it's grace for me.

I remember a particular grandmother who thought that tattoos were trashy and common, not in a good way, and perhaps un-Christian, in one of my former churches. She thought all that until her granddaughter got a nice little rose tattooed right there on her shoulder,

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 8, 2007

and then she said, well, it's a pretty little rose. It's not a skull, and I don't know why everybody's making such a big deal over it!

Those of you who know me know that I am not political in any traditional sense of the word, but I do keep up with current events. I notice an odd thing that is illustrative. We hear frequently, and on bumper stickers and t-shirts, that Bush lied, people died. However you feel about that, it is a matter of public record that in 1998, saying almost word for word what Bush said about weapons of mass destruction, President Clinton fired over several days 400 ballistic missiles into Iraq. Now, this is not a political statement. This is an illustration of how we all tend to demand law and judgment for others and grace for me and mine. We could go on and on and on until everybody's ox was gored.

The Galatians text is talking about God's grace as the most important thing in the world, and the folks in Galatia got it in the beginning, and they rejoiced in it, and they accepted it, and Paul went away satisfied that the church there at least understood grace. Then he came back, and he found them trying to work their way into Heaven again, to impress God by their law-keeping. There was a group that came in pushing the law as the way to go, and this group had gotten to them, and these folks with a theological and political and power agenda wanted Christianity to be just another branch of Judaism, just another set of rules and regulations and rituals and such. They wanted to keep the law and to keep the right to look down upon others who did not keep the law as they interpreted it and just sort of tacked Jesus on the end as grace for me and mine.

Now, in case you're wondering, the law really is shorthand for the Law of Moses, and that is essentially the Ten Commandments plus the rights and the rituals and the rules. The law of Christ means grace and grace and grace, grace that you understand that in your heart you have never, ever even for a day kept the law of Moses, and grace that led you to know that you needed forgiveness for your utter self-centeredness, and grace that leads you to an understanding that, even when you do a good thing, it is often for selfish or self-centered reasons. Finally, grace that cries out for someone to save you from the downward spiral of self and sin and death, Jesus is God's answer to that cry! Jesus is the someone who saves and heals. Jesus is God intervening when we know we cannot do what we know is good and right. Jesus is God assuring us of complete forgiveness, complete love and forgiveness, which we did not earn, which is offered to whomsoever will come, offered freely to all, to all who turn to God in trust.

Grace means the free gift of love and forgiveness and life eternal for you and you and you AND them and them and them, whoever they are, and even if they break the law more blatantly than we think we do. Grace, if it is free, you cannot earn it. Grace, the gift of love from God through Christ.

We do a funny thing very much like the Galatians did. We give money, and we think, well, of course God loves me, I give money. Now, don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with giving money to the church especially in the second week of July of this year, but if you give and you think God owes you something, you have stepped away from

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 8, 2007

grace, and you’ve stepped back into the law, trying to earn your way into God’s heart. You are already in God’s heart, and Jesus is ample proof of that.

You may think, God, I’ve suffered through long and boring sermons, week after week after week, you owe me! I wondered if I’d get an amen on that. You call these pews padded! You know. That’s stepping backwards into the law. We do mission projects. We do mission projects, and they are good things, but they can be done out of an overflowing of God’s love, out to others, or they can be done trying to earn your way into God’s heart. You are already in God’s heart. It boils down to the center and to the focus of your faith. Is it God whom we humbly trust and follow, or is it you and your ego and your need to appear good to others? I don’t know, and I cannot know. God knows.

I could call the division external faith for others to see or internal faith that is in love with God to such a degree that it simply overflows in love to others. External people can be loving in public and sons of Pharisees at home. Internal, internal faith, internal people have a glow about them that is consistent in the light and in the dark.

Now, the Ten Commandments still matter, of course, but they are part of what leads us to our knees when we really try to do them, not just externally but internally, and we know that they are right, but we find out that we cannot keep them, not in our wandering thoughts, not without help. External obedience with only our personal resources will not do, but God in Christ has promised a spiritual power, the change, the new attitude, and the new way that allows us to love God completely, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Isn’t that the Ten Commandments rolled into one sentence?

It is so much easier to love yourself when you know that you have failed and found that God’s love and God’s grace and forgiveness was there waiting to pick you up and dust you off and say now, this time, let’s try it together.

One of my relatives last week was wondering about my father’s faith, and he immediately went to, well, he’s basically a good man. Good is an English word that comes from God and godly, and I really didn’t know where to start. Who of us is good enough to make God owe us anything?

The old rabbis used to say that the law was a chain from Heaven to Earth, and if you broke one link then the chain is broken, and you lay broken and separated on the ground. The hope that any of us have, the hope that I have is not in my own goodness, but in God’s grace, God’s free will to love and forgive and accept and embrace me. God’s grace to empower me and to change me and to grow in me a new heart that really cares on the inside, not just acts nice on the outside. I suppose we could look at the law as ego-centered faith. I did this! I fulfilled that! I obeyed this! I obeyed that! I have kept the law since my youth said a man once to Jesus.

Then along came Jesus, who defined faith as a matter of the heart, a heart that trusts God. From Abraham on down, that seems to be what God has always wanted from us. Trust!

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 8, 2007

Do you trust your own incomplete goodness or do you trust God’s all-consuming love and grace? God’s grace is free. God’s love is free. God’s forgiveness is free, but there are those who would take three giant steps backward and call it a new thing and add Jesus plus this and Jesus plus that until Jesus becomes very small, and the new rule makers become almost godlike. Recall how harshly Jesus judged the scribes and the Pharisees, who said men must do this and women cannot do that. Eat this, not that. They added rituals, and they added rules. Jesus said so. He said that they added to the law and made it a weight too heavy for men to bear! He said of them, in Matthew 23, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites because you shut the Kingdom of Heaven against men, for you neither enter yourself nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites for you traverse the sea and the land to make a single convert, and when he becomes a convert you make him twice as much a child of Hell as yourselves! Woe to you blind guys.”

Jesus was mad! They tracked people down as they did here in Galatia, and loaded them down with religious rules and regulations, and kept themselves and their converts away from the new thing that God was doing in Christ – grace, freely-given grace. There are people who just want to convert you over to their side, and the side that they have chosen and wrapped their ego around this or that, but God opposes the proud, and gives grace to the humble. Humble trust in God is what Jesus lived. It is what Jesus preached. Accept God’s love and accept God’s power to pass it on. We are not good. God is. If we reflect God’s goodness, it is God who gets the credit. Love, forgiveness and grace begin and end with God, for us, and most important, also for our enemies, and for whomsoever will come – even those we consider outside our circle.

The good news is not just for me and people like me. It is for the world.

C. S. Lewis, who was an atheist, and became a strong defender of Christian faith, walked into the middle of an argument one time, and asked what all the rumpus was about. They were arguing about the uniqueness of Christianity, and C. S. Lewis said, “Well, that’s easy! It’s grace!”

Christianity is unique because it preaches grace. He was correct. The very heart of the Gospel is that God accepts us with no conditions when we put our trust in His life and death and resurrection in Christ. God opposes the proud, who think they can make God owe them, and gives grace to the humble, which know their need and dependence upon God.

As Paul says in today’s reading from Galatians, “If you have to boast about something, boast about Jesus!” My faith is not about me or mine or even being better than this one or that one. It is about God and God’s grace for me and for you and for my enemies and for the outsiders! God’s grace, not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world! It is bigger than we think! Thanks be to God. Amen.