

Life in the Spirit

Sunday School Lesson

Galatians 5:22-26, Ephesians 4:1-6

June 26, 2022

--- Let us sing our call to study the Scripture. Let's sing *Since Jesus Came into my Heart*:

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought

Since Jesus came into my heart;

I have light in my soul for which long I have sought,

Since Jesus came into my heart.

Refrain:

Since Jesus came into my heart,

Since Jesus came into my heart;

Floods of joy o'er my soul like the sea billows roll,

Since Jesus came into my heart.

I have ceased from my wand'ring and going astray,

Since Jesus came into my heart;

And my sins which were many are all washed away,

Since Jesus came into my heart. Refrain

I'm possessed of a hope that is steadfast and sure,

Since Jesus came into my heart;

And no dark clouds of doubt now my pathway obscure,

Since Jesus came into my heart. Refrain

Let us pray

O Holy God,

We thank you for your Spirit that lives with us each day. Give us wisdom to make the choices that lead to life. Help us listen to your Spirit so we may discern your ways.

Amen.

Our Purpose Statement:

To understand that we receive grace in order to give grace.

What is Legalism?

In Christian theology, legalism (or nomism) is a pejorative term applied to the idea that "by doing good works or by obeying the law, a person earns and merits salvation." One of the main practical differences between Christianity and other religions is the way we are intended to practice our faith. When grace is missing from the church or from a group of Christians, generally the culprit is legalism. Our Scripture passage today is talking about the fruits of the Spirit but we need to also understand the fruit of legalism. The bad fruit of legalism is judgment and a sense of superiority in people who are just as messed up as you and me. No one likes feeling judged. We live in a culture where most people are made to feel inadequate already so if they are feeling judged, they will run the other way. Life is hard enough without somebody sizing you up and finding you wanting in one way or another.

And, in a marriage, it will suffocate any love that was ever there. If your spouse is constantly making you feel as if you do not measure up, the marriage will soon be on the rocks.

The great irony is that most Christians have never experienced God's grace and are still mired in the same legalism that characterizes man-made religions that prescribe some variation on a To Do list as their "means of grace." Last week, we looked at the problem of Galatia in that Jewish Christians were insistent that Gentile Christian become followers of the law. Paul saw that as legalism and Paul should know; Paul was once the "King" of legalism so it took one to know one. He wanted no part of that in Christ's churches.

Read Galatians 5:22-26, Ephesians 4:1-6

As a pastor, I have observed how church members judge each other and how they judge those within the community. If I had to pick, I would list these topics as the top judgments made:

1. Poverty – Judging people by their economic status
2. Sexual Behavior/ Marital status – Judging people who are divorced, single, or whose sexual orientation may be different from their own
3. Social Circles – Judging people by whether or not they are "one of us"

The perception is that "good" people have good jobs and work. Normal people are married. If you are divorced, it means something is wrong with you. We have circles of friends and we sometimes mistakenly believe that what our group thinks is what matters. Cliques within a church are often blinded by the perceptions of their own circle of friends.

In 1999, Bill Ehlig and Ruby K Payne, PhD. published a book entitles *What Every Church Member Should Know about Poverty*. It was revised and updated in 2013. On pages 4 & 5, they list these key points about poverty.

- 1 Poverty and wealth are relative. We basically know our own poverty or wealth only in relationship to others.
2. Poverty occurs in all races and countries. The notion of middle class as a large segment of the society is a phenomenon of the past 100 years. In the United States the largest group of individuals in poverty is children under the age of 18. If one counts the number of children in poverty or very close to it, the number is close to 50%. One of the biggest misconceptions is the difference between percentages and numbers. The greatest number of children in poverty are white, but the greatest percentage of children in poverty is by minority group.
3. Generational and situational poverty are different. It generally takes two generations to make the transition from middle class into poverty. When an individual has been in poverty two generations or more, then the patterns and habits are different. Situation poverty is when there is a divorce, death, or illness and the resources are temporarily reduced, but the mindset remains largely with middle class norms and values.
4. This work is based upon patterns of the group and all patterns have exceptions.
5. Every individual brings with him or her the hidden rules of the economic group in which he or she was raised. Hidden rules are those unspoken cueing mechanisms we use to let people know they do or do not belong.

6. Schools and businesses use hidden rules of the middle class. So do many churches. Because America now tends to be economically segregated, most individuals do not know the rules of other economic classes.
7. For churches to be successful with the poor, members must understand the hidden rules of generational poverty, as well as middle class, so that the transition can be more readily accepted. For the transition to occur, both sets of rules must be openly acknowledged.
8. To move from poverty to middle class norms and values, a period of time exists where some relationships are broken. These relationships may be resumed at another time, but there is a period of time in which the old relationships are very tentative and sometimes, broken.
9. The fundamental reasons for poverty are lack of educational attainment and the disconnection of family and/or community. Four reasons one leaves poverty: It is too painful to stay, a vision or goal, a key relationship, or a special talent or skill.

So why have I given you a bunch of facts about poverty when we are supposed to be talking about grace? Think for a minute about how we think we can solve poverty. We want people to get a job. We want people to take pride in their being, dress, and conduct. We think people should clean up their homes. Do you see the “to do” list forming here? We tend to apply a whole set of rules to getting people out of poverty the same way we are going to “fix” a marriage, a sexual orientation, or groups of critics in a church. We all think legalistically because we are human. But the Spirit does things differently. The Spirit uses grace and relationships. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says this in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*:

“By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.”

The Power of Grace

Charles R. Swindoll says this about grace:

Grace has to be the loveliest word in the English language. It embodies almost every attractive quality we hope to find in others. Grace is a gift of the humble to the humiliated. Grace acknowledges the ugliness of sin by choosing to see beyond it. Grace accepts a person as someone worthy of kindness despite whatever grime or hard-shell casing keeps him or her separated from the rest of the world. Grace is a gift of tender mercy when it makes the least sense.”

If you have not experienced this grace, then perhaps you have never truly sought it. Most of us resist it in favor of doing things our way so we never ask for it because we falsely believe our legalism can get us where we want to go. In the process, we become difficult to be around because we are always criticizing someone, we are always judging someone, and we are always arguing with someone. Then comes the day when you just cannot do it anymore. You recognize that your life has become one big failure of broken relationships and you do not want to live that way anymore. You surrender to God with just these words, “God, help me. I’m a train wreck and I’m making train wrecks of all the people I love.” Then the Spirit steps in and you see things very differently. You see the harm you have caused and you realize that God has forgiven you. You see the hurt and pain you have caused and you realize that God still love you. You realized your anger has pushed everyone away but God is still holding you, telling you that you are beloved. And suddenly, all that defeat, all that anger, and all that pain is

just washed away. You have experienced grace. And guess what? You cannot wait to grant that grace to others.

Without hesitation you begin bearing the fruit of the Spirit and you know it was a divine power that did that and nothing you have done:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Galatians 5:22-23

O Holy God,

Thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit who provides wisdom in our lives. Help us to see the fallacy in thinking we can do this all on our own. May your Spirit be with us this week. Amen.

Prayers for...

the people of Ukraine

the world leaders working towards peace

victims of gun violence

the families of the 11,540 Arkansans who have died from COVID-19

our church family...Joyce Mann, Sherry & Ron Randolph, Elizabeth Rowlett, Gloria Bounds, Ruth Dempsey, Bill & Mary Lue Gibbs, the Daugherty family, Ed & Bonnie House, Cindy Dickson (6/27), Linda McAllister, Bill Huey, Verna Riley (7/18), Annette Dorman

hospice... Marian Dorflinger, James Crawford

extended family... Johnetta Green, Mary Jane Speer, Renita Everhart, Kay Shaw, Robert Parham, Melanie Lindsey, Mari Sutterfield, Tim Merritt, Ruth Hall, Dorothy Lowe, Camille Helms, Jean Beaver, Jill Harbart-Pratt, Harrison Bounds, Joyce Talbot, Kodey Cook, Tim Womack, Will Lemons, Nancy Garner

homebound or assisted living ... Elizabeth Taylor, Lou Ellis Heard, Sarah Shirey, Maurice Graves, Faye Brown, Cledra & Gerald Keith, Juanice Barker, Danny Barnes, Bill Morrison, Lou Slaughter, Marlene Rhomine, Virginia Guthrie, John McMahan

military...Buck Lucas, Christian Lucas, Chris Hagameister

Christian love and sympathy is extended to Clay and Anna Jones, Erin, Mike, Jonathan and Hanna McAllister in the death of Clay's mother, Elizabeth Jones.

Christian love and sympathy are extended to Dot Everett in the death of her sister, Edith Brown.