

190616 Sermon notes Galatians 3: 23-29

The message that Jesus brought about the nature of God and the nature of life as God would have us live it is so radical and unprecedented that it scares us half to death. Even for the majority of Christians down through the ages, it has seemed too risky and too frightening, and so we have tended to distort it back into something more understandable and manageable. The thing is that human society has relied on religion to be something that maintains order and keeps us all safe. We have kept people in line by keeping them in fear of an all-knowing big-brother God from whose angry punishments no law-breaker can escape. And since not everyone is going to believe in God or fear God, we have patterned our legal systems on the same model so that those who can't be kept in line by the fear of God might at least be kept in line by the fear of those to whom the task of dispensing God's laws and punishments has been delegated in this life. And the natural fear is that if we were to suddenly believe Jesus and start saying God is not like that and that no amount of good or bad behaviour will make any difference to God's love for you or acceptance of you, then it would be like just unlocking all the jails and hoping for the best. Everyone would be completely out of control. We fear that it would be like suddenly removing all the fences and walls at the zoo in the name of animal freedom. There'd be freedom alright, but also a lot of screaming and blood.

So a fear of lawlessness, understood as chaos, makes it more attractive to maintain the idea that Christianity is just another legal-code religion, only perhaps a more refined version. The need to keep the chaos under control keeps such religions attractive because it gives them a social function. In the reading from Galatians,

*But before the time for faith came, the Law kept us all locked up as prisoners until this coming faith should be revealed. And so the Law was in charge of us until Christ came, in order that we might then be put right with God through faith. Now that the time for faith is here, the Law is no longer in charge of us.*

*JB Phillips Before the coming of faith we were all imprisoned under the power of the Law, with our only hope of deliverance the faith that was to be shown to us. Or, to change the metaphor, the Law was like a strict governess in charge of us until we went to the school of Christ and learned to be justified by faith in him. Once we had that faith we were completely free from the governess's authority.*

Tom Wright translates governess as a "babysitter", because the original word refers to a slave who was a kind of nanny or au pair for the family's children.

And what is important about that is the inference that this job of keeping them out of trouble is understood as only being necessary because they are too immature to be able to take responsibility for their own behaviour and safety. The laws and commandments are like that, says Paul, something we needed when we were childishly selfish and out of control, before Jesus came and raised us up to new life and maturity so that we could live freely and responsibly and graciously.

And among the reasons we don't just ditch that old part of the Bible now Jesus has come are that we need to know what we have been freed from and that there will always be children and some immature selfish adults who are still needing the clear constraints of a set of rules while they grow into their freedom.

But one of the problems with continuing to acknowledge the value of the law is the danger of mistaking it for the real thing; of thinking that it is God's main plan. Apart from anything else, when we give too much weight to the law, we tend to completely misunderstand God. We begin to see compliance with the law as the thing God is most concerned about, and so we begin to imagine God as someone who is watching us disapprovingly, counting up our mistakes and holding them against us.

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It seems as if many teams in Euros seek first and foremost to keeping a clean sheet that is, not conceding any goals. wins matches. If you can avoid conceding any goals, it doesn't matter how few you score. And it is true if winning is all that matters, but it makes for rather boring football to watch. And living under the watch of the law and a law obsessed god can be like that. We imagine that getting on the right side of God's tally sheet involves just scoring one more goal than we concede, just balancing out our sins with good deeds and at least one more. So the law becomes our defence strategy so that by scrupulous compliance we can make sure sin never scores against us and it remains reasonably easy to get ahead. But that's no way to live. God is not going to be overjoyed by queues of people at the pearly gates saying "I didn't do anything wrong". God would be shaking his head and muttering, "That's because you didn't do anything at all. Your life was the most boringly defensive football match I've seen in all eternity." The law can help keep us out of trouble, but it cannot get us in to life in all its fullness. In fact it stifles it. So much of the law was about establishing frameworks of holiness in which everybody had their place and was constrained by the limitations of their place. Men here, women there, Jews here, gentiles there. Everyone in their place and their access to God defined by their place and the rules that applied to their place. But all that is no longer, says the Apostle. It is now a level playing field in Christ.

Actually, if I push the football metaphor a bit further, it is like changing teams and beginning to play with a team who have a whole different game plan. We've ditched the colours of one team and pulled on the shirts of a new team with an entirely different approach to the game. No longer is it all about miserly defence. Now it is about a joyous and generous approach. Now it is about living life to the full, rather than avoiding mistakes by avoiding life altogether.

Jesus's attitude to the law was quite clear. He was frequently accused of breaking it, but he mostly didn't speak against it. He just regarded it as a very inadequate basis for understanding God and what God wanted of us in our living of life. The best the old law could do was put some limits on people's tendency to retaliate in the hope that it wouldn't escalate and get out of control. What Jesus pointed us to was something very different - a world in which retaliation was replaced by radical resilient love.

If we are followers of Jesus, then we are followers of someone who was never known for the things he refrained from. But I can't think of a single story where Jesus is described by anyone in terms of the behaviours he scrupulously avoided. I'm not saying for a moment that there were no limits to his behaviour, just that his behaviour was not dictated and thus known for its limits, but for its focus. He was not known for his defensive game, but for the joyous exuberance of his love and mercy and acceptance. We have been set free, for, as Paul puts it, "now that faith has come, we are no longer need a baby sitter (or no longer need a nanny?), for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. When we are saved in Christ from the compulsive need to continue the hate-fuelled cycles of an-eye-for-an-eye, we are saved into a life that is not defined by law; in fact, a life in which the law has become as obsolete and irrelevant as the need to tell a loving parent to care for their child. Jesus certainly showed us how tough and costly such love-in-the-face-of-hostility can be in a world that still clings to law as its best risk management despite its ongoing failure. But Jesus also showed us how free and joyous and abundant such a life can be. Clearly he thought that saving us into such a life was something worth dying for. And if he thought it was worth dying for, then surely it is something worth us really embracing and living for.