

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(September 10, 2023)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Growing a Culture of Grace

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

Learning the Language of Faith

(Galatians 3:1-14)

Study #4

Introduction: Language acquisition...

If you and I were to sit down and make a list of the things that make a culture a culture, we would include things like clothing, music, food, and drink. These and other items are all elements of culture.

When a small or large number of people have these sorts of things in common, they start looking like a culturally distinct group.

High on the list of culture-making elements, maybe ranking right at the top of the list, is language.

It's possible, but hard to form or to join a culture if you don't share a common language.

I know. I've been lost in translation in lots of places, among them India, Russia, Uruguay/Chile/Mexico/ Nicaragua, Belgium, and Germany.

As those of us who aren't bilingual know, you can't enter fully into a conversation with someone who only speaks Spanish if you don't know Spanish.

Without conversation, one of the key elements of shared culture is cut off.

Part of my current story involves language acquisition. It was the presence of Encuentro that motivated me to begin studying Spanish some time ago.

I've logged a lot of consecutive days on Duolingo and have stuck my toe into conversations with Spanish speakers. But I have a long, long way to go.

My dream is to be able to have real, honest conversations with people in Spanish, to make connection with a Spanish speaker in their heart language.

I know that simply speaking the language isn't all that is required to fully enter a culture. But I also know that language acquisition opens a door. So, I'll continue to study Spanish.

One way to picture the journey that we are taking here at our church as we take "next steps" with Jesus, one way to think about growing a culture of grace, is to imagine all of us learning a new language, together.

Separate from Jesus, our 2023 San Antonio setting has certain culture markers. Those markers include clothing, music, food, and drink. The culture is also marked by how we interact with each other and relate to each other.

It's how we greet as we pass each other on an HEB aisle, what we expect of each other, how we fit as we're out and about.

Today, I'm lumping all these culture markers together and am calling it all "language."

Well, here at church, we want to grow a particular kind of culture. We want to grow a Jesus-centered culture of grace.

Today, in one set of comments the Apostle Paul makes in his letter to the Galatians, he points us to that new culture. He highlights one culture-making element that makes the church unique and uniquely winsome to a watching world.

Continuing with my theme of language acquisition, Paul tells us that crucial to growing a grace culture is learning the language of faith.

Review...

Paul wrote the letter to the new Christians living in the region of Galatia (Asia Minor, today's Turkey) because they were being exposed to the teaching of troublemakers.

Paul loved these Galatians, so he's reminded them of the story of how he became a Christian. He's reminded them of the beautiful, simple gospel of grace.

Last Sunday, you listened as Charlie retold the story of Peter's hypocrisy and how he, Paul, confronted Peter.

All of this has tremendous application to us.

It is just what we, who want to take next steps with Jesus, need to hear. And today, we hear more of the same. This is essential stuff.

But the way Paul starts off here is different. He begins with a set of five questions. These are rhetorical questions.

A rhetorical question is a question that the question-asker asks when he's really not looking for an answer.

For instance, when I was a teenager, my father would often ask me rhetorical questions, like, "*What were you thinking?*"

Dad wasn't asking me to tell him what my mental thought processes had been while, as a high schooler, I was burning out the clutch on his car. It was a rhetorical question.

It is in that spirit that Paul poses his questions to the Galatians.

And, as we'll hear when we interact with these questions, Paul asks them passionately.

A Few (rhetorical) Questions that Provide Answers (vv. 1-5)

These Questions Reveal PASSION

What he's doing in the first five verses of Galatians 3 is like what a coach does when he yells at a player on the first day of practice. He's grabbing attention. He's calling attention to a problem.

It's what a mom or a dad is doing after their child has done something disobedient and dangerous.

They ask their child, "*What were you thinking are you out of your mind were you raised in a barn whatever gave you the idea to do that who do you think you are, anyway?*"

This is intense. Paul is baffled by the Galatians' recent actions. Confusion is behind every one of the questions.

My dad's rhetorical question - "*What were you thinking?*" - revealed something about me (that I wasn't thinking...). In the same way, Paul's rhetorical questions reveal a few things, too.

His questions highlight the language that *should* be spoken in a church AND reveal that it wasn't being spoken in the Galatian churches.

These Questions Reveal REALITY

Bewitched (v. 1)

[1] You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

Note the addressees. Paul didn't speak to an individual in the church. He wasn't writing to the leaders. He was speaking to the collective group of believers who made up the churches in Galatia.

And, by this first question we learn that they had been taken in. A bewitcher had pulled them away from a focus on the centrality of the cross.

It's significant that the first concern Paul mentions in his list of concerns is a neglect of the centrality of the death of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus' crucifixion is the historical heart of our faith. We believe in the Jesus who died for our sins and rose from the dead (the two acts are inseparable). And because of what He did for us there and then, we have eternal life, here and now.

The Galatians had forgotten/neglected/dismissed/disregarded that. They weren't speaking the language of the cross to each other.

They also weren't paying attention to how they received the Spirit of God in their lives.

Receiving the Spirit (v. 2)

[2] This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

Paul's clear teaching is that if you have the Holy Spirit, you belong to Jesus. If you don't have the Spirit, you don't belong to Jesus.¹

So, his question, "*How did you receive the Spirit?*" is the same as, "*How were you saved?*"

Clearly, it was all by faith. It didn't happen because they kept a bunch of rules. No. God saw faith in Jesus, and that opened the door for the Spirit to move in.

Again, that's how things started. But they weren't speaking the language of faith.

So, yes, Paul is concerned that we remember how things got started with Jesus. The first two questions revolve around the start.

But he's just as concerned with how we who have trusted Jesus are to live *after* we are saved. Hence, question #3.

Growing in Jesus (v. 3)

[3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

The big problem in the Galatian churches was something we call *legalism*.²

Legalism defines progress in a walk with Jesus in terms of conformity to an extra-biblical, external code of conduct.

Here, I'm not talking about moral rights and wrongs, but things like what you wear, what you eat, with whom you associate.

These Galatians had paid attention to the teachers who came to them after Paul left.

Those troublemakers said that having been justified before God by grace through faith, God will now grow them through rules and regulations, what he calls, "***the flesh.***"

The Galatians swallowed the troublemakers' teaching, hook, line, and sinker.

In the case of the Galatian troublemakers, that code was the Jewish culture found in the Mosaic Law. But legalism can involve enforcing conformity to any non-biblical external code of conduct.³

And following an external code doesn't promote Christlikeness and it sure doesn't bring about spiritual maturity.

² The reason we know that legalism is a big problem is that it is spoken against so often in the New Testament. There is something in the human heart that longs for the clarity of rules and that balks at the warmth of relationship and relational submission.

³ Yes, of course it is true that conformity to an external code has some value. For instance, when everybody in a group wears the same kind of clothes, has the same hair style, listens to the same music, eats the same kinds of food, and greets with the same handshake, there is some social cohesion. But that kind of cohesion is never going to exist in a church, because in the Body of Christ, diversity is celebrated.

¹ See Romans 8:9.

Here's a for instance.

Back when I attended Dallas Theological Seminary, there was a dress code for the men. We were required to wear a coat and tie every day and we were not allowed to wear beards.

The coat and tie and no-beard standard may seem silly today, but back then, the Seminary's Board of Directors required this extra-biblical code of us students. For whatever reason.

The Board was well within its rights to make those rules. And, given the Dallas culture during the time that I attended seminary, you could make the case that it made sense.

But did the wearing of a tie make any of us students more like Jesus? No. Did a clean-shaven face enhance our spirituality? Of course not. Did the overall witness of the school to the outsiders in Dallas improve with our appearance? With some, maybe. With many others, no.

The spirituality of a Christian community is not enhanced by following an extra-biblical code of conduct.

The Galatian churches had turned from the way of the Spirit to the way of conformity to an external code as the route to growth. That was a wrong turn.

They were speaking the language of rules and regulations, not the language of the freedom the Spirit brings.

The next question is painful.

Suffering in vain (v. 4)

[4] Did you suffer so many things in vain - if indeed it was in vain?

We know that Paul suffered greatly while bringing the message of the Gospel to the Galatians. He was ridiculed, rejected, and stoned nearly to death.

Based on what he says here, the Galatians suffered, too.

They suffered for the very counter-cultural message of *"Don't be concerned with the Law of Moses. The issue is faith alone in Jesus Christ alone."*

But they had stopped speaking that language, which had prompted the persecutions in the first place.

They had set aside that language for a language of works which made their earlier sufferings pointless.

And a final question.

Unleashing God's power (v. 5)

[5] So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

This is a question that accuses. Paul heard that the Galatian churches adopted the language of legalism.

Their words to each other are, *"We're wearing the right clothes, singing the right tunes, eating the right food. THAT's why God is at work."*

They have silenced the language of faith.

But the truth is that in the first-century churches of Galatia and here at Northwest, the power of God to change lives, to restore and to transform, to meet needs, and to answer prayer is unleashed by faith.

Summary:

Paul has reminded us that what welcomes us into life in Jesus is faith in Jesus.

The fatal mistake is to think that now that we are God's children, the rules have changed.

It is tempting to think that God now requires obedience to an external set of cultural norms (like the Law) if we want to stay right with Him or get righter with Him.

Not true.

God performs His wonders of grace through faithful hearts, not through rules-oriented, legalistic hearts. God is looking to use and to bless those who trust Him.

Leading a life of faith is the way to make progress in Jesus. It's not about works. It's about walking by faith. And in Scripture, faith is the non-work.

So, to demonstrate just how crucial faith is, Paul looks backwards two thousand years to the father of the faithful: Abraham.

A Story that Provides Insight (vv. 6-9)

Abraham's Story (Genesis 15:1-6)

About ten years after God first promised Abraham that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son, Abraham suffered a crisis of faith.

When we catch up to Abraham in Genesis 15, he was around eighty-five years of age, no spring rooster. He was losing hope in God's promise.

So, when God repeated that original promise, Abraham cleared his throat and spoke to God: ***[Genesis 15:2] "Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ...[3] SINCE YOU HAVE GIVEN ME NO SON*** (emphasis added), ***one who has been born in my house is my heir.***"

God responded with great grace to Abraham's doubts.

One night, long before light pollution blotted out stars and back when the Canaanite skies were as bright with stars as the darkest skies of west Texas, God led Abraham outside of his tent and told him to look up and count the stars.

Abraham looked up and then listened as God told him, ***[Genesis 15:5] "So shall your descendants be."***

Abraham's response to this amazing promise?

[Genesis 15:6] Then he believed in the LORD; and He credited it to him as righteousness.

Abraham was declared righteous - justified, saved - because he believed - all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding - that God would keep His promise to give him a son.

That's a great story. And we notice here that chronology is the key that unlocks the mystery of theology.

God justified Abraham close to five hundred years before He gave the Law of Moses (Exodus 20). That means that Abraham's salvation couldn't have anything to do with Law-keeping because the Law hadn't even been given.

As well, notice the part that Abraham's works - good and bad - played in his salvation.

The sins he committed prior to Genesis 15 (notice one terrible sin in Genesis 12) didn't disqualify him from being saved. God justified him anyway, on the basis of faith.

And his many acts of obedience had nothing to do with his getting saved either.

Abraham, the father of the faithful didn't DO anything to be justified. He simply trusted in God's promise. That is Abraham's story.

And that is our story, too.

Our Story (vv. 6-9)

[6] Just as Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. [7] Therefore, recognize that it is those

who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. [8] The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." [9] So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

The Galatian troublemakers said, "If you want to become sons of Abraham, you must be Law-keepers, like Moses was."

Paul remembered his chronology, so he knew that was all wrong.

His message was, "If you want to be sons of Abraham, then you must trust God's promise like Abraham did!"

There it is again. The primacy of faith. Trusting reliance on God. Depending on Him. That's the thing.

Now, we're almost done. But in the time that remains, we're going to listen as Paul digs deep into the heart of the Gospel. He points out the enormity of what Jesus did for us when He died on the cross.

A Justification Provided by Grace. Accessed by Faith (vv. 10-14)

Condemned by Works Alone! (v. 10)

[10] For all who are of works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THE THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO DO THEM."

OK. Anyone who doesn't abide by ALL the requirements of the Law is under God's curse. That's sobering.

Galatians 3:10 is a quote from the Old Testament. (Deut. 27:26)

It is interesting to learn how some first-century Jewish interpreters looked looking at this verse.

Some said that if a person obeyed more than they disobeyed, they were justified before God on the basis of their works.

That's like someone today who believes that if their good works outweigh their bad works, then they will be saved.

But that ignores the plain language of the verse.

Moses wrote and Paul agrees that any violation of God's Law results in condemnation. What is required is moral perfection if we are going to come to God to be justified, armed only with our works.

And, as experience - and Scripture - shows, it is impossible for us to perfectly obey all that the Law requires.

If we're willing to be at all reflective, we will admit that we've fallen far short of what we need to do and to be to attain righteousness through our works, our obedience to God's Law.

In fact, the Mosaic Law - or any other kind of law - can never justify. Law doesn't justify. It condemns.

And, if in anyone's case Law does not condemn, that is not because that person found justification through the Law or by works. It is because they approached God on the basis of grace through faith.

Saved by Faith Alone (vv. 11-12)

[11a] Now, that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident...

How is this evident? Well, it's evident from the life of Abraham.

But Paul goes on to show from the Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk, that it's just a general principle of how God works, that *[11b]... "THE RIGHTEOUS ONE WILL LIVE BY FAITH."*⁴

⁴ Quoting Habakkuk 2:4.

And the sense of that quote is, *"It is the one who is righteous (justified) by faith, who will live before God"* - NOT the one who seeks righteousness through works of the Law.

God has never justified anyone by works. Not in the days of the Old Testament, and not now. There is no hope for anyone who approaches God on the basis of works.

But there is a way to approach God that assures us of a gracious response.

Listen, now, as Paul gives us one of the most amazing statements found anywhere in the New Testament.

The Work of Christ for Us (vv. 13-14)

Jesus placed Himself under the curse of God (v. 13)

[13] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us - for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE."

Jesus, the Son of God, became a curse for us. He suffered the wrath of God in our place.⁵

Having done absolutely nothing wrong and having done everything exactly right, Jesus died as the perfect lamb of God. He voluntarily took upon Himself the guilt for our sin.

By doing that, He placed Himself under God's curse. He gave Himself as an innocent substitute for guilty sinners, leading to Paul's punchline.

We receive, by faith, the promised Spirit (v. 14)

[14] in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

⁵ This is what is meant by the word "atonement."

And there it is again. The blessing of Abraham - life, eternal life, the gift of the Spirit - comes only through faith in Jesus. The key is not what we do. The key is what Jesus has already done.⁶

Believe Him to give you what He promised He would give you. And walk in that.

Conclusion:

There is a certain way of interacting, a style of relating, a language in our society's broader culture. The vocabulary of that language is all about what is seen, felt, and heard. Our physical senses.

In our culture's language, God may be lightly considered or nodded to. But He is mostly irrelevant. God isn't essential to the language of the broader culture.

The culture's language is focused on the temporal. It is earthly.

The language of the culture is high on self. Self-preservation and self-advancement are huge.

For that reason, health is all-important. I was listening to a podcast recently that focused not on "lifespan" but on "healthspan." The message was clear. Without your health, you aren't really living.

The language of our culture is also big on playing it safe.

There will always be exceptions to this rule (adrenaline junkies), but avoiding danger at all costs, minimizing risk, and seeing death as the ultimate loss is central to our culture's language.

⁶ Paul preached a message of salvation apart from works of any kind. Just like Jesus (John 3:16), Paul assured anyone who simply believed in Jesus that they would receive eternal life. (See Romans 5) That teaching prompted some to accuse Paul, falsely, of antinomianism. That is the idea that God doesn't care about moral behavior or character. But God does care about behavior. It simply isn't tied to the offer of eternal life. It may be true that if we are not, from time to time, accused of antinomianism, we are not preaching the Gospel that Paul preached.

And then we come to Jesus. In Him, we are introduced to another language. And at first, it is as foreign sounding to us as English is to a Pashtu speaker from Afghanistan.

It's the language of faith.

God is central to this language. When acquiring this language, we learn to major in eternity. We are learning to take what we can't see more seriously than what we do see. We affirm the presence and the activity of Jesus, everywhere and at all times.

Self-preservation isn't central in Jesus speak. Health is important, but it isn't all-important. We can flourish in Jesus while suffering very poor health. In fact, in Jesus, we learn that dying is gain.

So, how do we acquire fluency in this language?

Well, every week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, people come to our church to learn English. Speakers of Spanish and Pashtu and Russian and Portuguese seek language acquisition in ESL classes.

We acquire the language of faith as we speak it to each other.

Add this to the reasons you come to church, attend an ABF or Care Group, interact over a meal with fellow Christians.

Every interaction with a brother or sister is a faith language acquisition opportunity where you:

- Tell your friend about your most recent life-with-Jesus moment.
- Pray with someone.
- Ask for prayer.
- Point the person you are with to Jesus.
- Cheer someone on who is using faith vocabulary.
- Applaud the brother or sister who is stepping out in bold faith and puts something valuable at risk for Jesus.
- Urge someone to walk by faith in a challenging moment.

You're concerned that you aren't yet fluent in the language of faith? Afraid that you might say something wrong?

Come upstairs sometime and listen to me try to speak Spanish in Encuentro. Watch how patient my Spanish-speaking friends are with me. They cheer me on for trying.

Your friends here will be just as patient and just as encouraging when you make your first attempts to speak the language of faith. It is safe to attempt to speak in the new language here.

Besides, no one has arrived at perfect fluency in the language of faith. We're all growing in this.

But as we, together, learn to speak and to live by the language of faith, we can be sure that God will grow a culture of grace.