

SPIRITUAL GRADUATION

SERIES: GALATIANS

By Steve Zeisler

Some close friends of mine have seen the first of their children graduate from High School on this graduation weekend. It has been interesting and instructive to watch these families as their young men and women crossed a threshold in life. One of the rites of passage in our culture is the threshold crossed at High School graduation. Childhood is, in large measure, left behind, and the responsibilities of adulthood are conferred.

One of the recurring themes of Scripture is the maturity of Christians. Speaking of this in 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul writes: “When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”

Thus Scripture urges us to pass from childhood to adulthood. We are admonished to graduate, to become grown-up, mature sons and daughters of God, to not live as infants any longer, paddling in the shallows of spiritual reality. It is appropriate perhaps that at this time of year we have reached a place in our study of the book of Galatians where we are urged to graduate, to become spiritually grown up, mature saints.

This section covers part of an answer given to the question raised in Galatians 3:19, “Why the Law then?” If the promise of God (which Paul has ringingly endorsed) is as good as Paul says it is, why was the Law ever given? Is there any good reason for it? Paul replies, “Yes indeed, there is a very good reason for it.” Galatians 3:23:

But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.

Before faith came in our experience the Law was operative, Paul declares. The law applied to the history of Israel, and it applied to us as individuals in the same sense. The Law was operative, valuable and necessary in that period of time before we graduated, when we were immature children, when our rebellion was unfettered. The apostle would perhaps agree with the analogy that our sinful human nature is rather like a vicious juvenile delinquent: it is wild, undisciplined, angry, prone to violence, and liable to do damage on every side. Paul says that when the Law operated during that period in our lives before faith came, “we were held in ‘custody’ under the law.” That word is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the action of armed guards being placed around a city. Thus Paul is saying that in that period of time before faith came to us, we were imprisoned; armed guards hemmed us in.

Further, we were kept under a “tutor.” There is no single word in English capable of conveying the idea the apostle has in mind at this point. He is describing a sort of “learning enforcer.” In his commentary on Galatians, John Stott says this tutor, this pedagogue, was often “harsh to the point of cruelty, and is often depicted in ancient drawings with a rod or a cane in his hand.” The learning enforcer ensured that the child in his control paid attention to the teacher and learned his lessons. The best modern equivalent, perhaps, would be the drill instructor at basic military training. We are all familiar with the figure of the harsh, angry, demanding drill instructor who breaks the undisciplined juvenile delinquent and forces him to

behave, making a valuable soldier out of him in the process. That is how the Law operated in our lives: it insisted on obedience in order to hem us in, to buffet us, because apart from it we were capable of and prone to evil and violent behavior. We needed something to restrain us.

Someone asks, “Is it good that we have such things as prisons and drill instructors?” Yes, it is good. They are necessary because of the propensity of human beings to evil. We would be much worse off without these things. As violent and terrible a place as a prison is, as humiliating and demanding as basic training is, the intent and the result of both of these institutions is good. Paul freely admits that the Law has a good purpose, but it was pain-filled and terrible to experience. Nobody in his right mind would ever go back to it. Once the process has been finished, once the intent has been met we were intended to be set free, to be grown up.

When faith comes we ought to live as free and responsible and graduated sons and daughters of God. Only a fool would want to go back to basic training, to boot camp. In fact, we can almost hear the incredulity in the apostle’s voice in the question he asks in Galatians 4:9, “How is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?” Only a fool would go back to the imprisonment of the Law once that horrible process had produced repentance, changed him and set him free.

“Why the Law then?” The painful taskmaster of the Law is always necessary, but it was never intended for those who had already graduated into life, for spiritual grown-ups. That is why Paul says in Galatians 3:25:

But now that faith has come [now that we have crossed over that threshold], we are no longer under a learning enforcer. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

We are no longer in custody. We are now the free, responsible heirs of the promise of Abraham. One very important practical consequence of that is that we are all one with each other. We were baptized the same way. There is no difference between Christians, no matter what their origin, who have been baptized in Christ (symbolized by water baptism). Everyone is placed into the same river. There is not one river for rich people and one river for the poor. Everyone is immersed entirely over his head; everyone comes up as wet as everybody else. Being baptized into Christ is an experience that we each share identically.

Further, we are “clothed in Christ.” Again, this brings to mind a graduation scene, when loose-fitting robes, all of the same color, are worn by the graduates. With “Pomp and Circumstance” playing in the background they all march in, everyone looking exactly alike. (It’s even hard to tell male from female in those loose-fitting robes; everyone looks alike.) We are “clothed in Christ;” when God looks at us he sees Jesus. The practical point here is that when we look at each other we ought not make any distinctions. Our cultural background should make no difference. Our graduation robes cover whatever we are wearing underneath. It does not matter whether we are wearing a Jewish prayer shawl or a Roman toga, the rags of a poor man or the finery of the rich, clothed in Christ we all look the same. Each man or woman wears Christ in the same way.

Under other circumstances we could spend weeks on this one verse, challenging ourselves with the essentially radical call that is being made here. At a PBC men’s breakfast yesterday, one man said, “I’m glad to find out that not everyone at PBC is an engineer!” He was alluding to the fact that it is, unfortunately, too easy to make distinctions; that people who

have degrees, who have expertise in the technological world we live in are in one class, whereas those who work with their hands and who have less education feel isolated at times. We need to hear the call of oneness in Christ.

And we need to hear this call today especially as we encounter the thinking and the writing of Christian feminists. “There is neither male nor female,” is the declaration here. The question, though, is, “In what sense is there neither male nor female?” While we can benefit from the thinking of Christian feminists--and there is much that is good in their thinking--we need to recognize at the same time that there is much that is wrong about it, that some make claims that are unbiblical.

In what sense is there no male and female? Let’s stop a moment and address that question. We live in a world that, tragically, has lost its way sexually. God made maleness and femaleness. He himself has maleness and femaleness about him. It is good to be a man, it is good to be a woman, but they are not the same thing. Nor were they ever intended by God to be the same thing. In their attempts to make the world androgynous, to reshape it so there are no longer clear distinctions between maleness and femaleness, feminists (and especially secular feminists) have introduced worse problems than those they were attempting to solve. God intended from the beginning that maleness and femaleness exist side by side.

We ought to be very aware that we are living in a fallen world, a world where the theatre, movies and the record industry revel in the lifestyles of transvestites, a world where modern rock stars espouse unisex, portrayed by erotically potent but seemingly genderless individuals. Men and women compete with each other in an unnatural way, resulting in anger, demanding of rights, loss of love, and the agony of children who are shunted aside. We ought to be discerning enough to see all that is happening and to resist the things that are wrong.

Yet the important declaration remains “In Christ there is neither male nor female.” As far as the lordship of Christ is concerned there is no distinction between men and women. Our Lord intends women to be grown-up disciples, not the junior partners of men. He expects serious Christianity just as much from women as he does from men. He expects courage just as much from women as he does from men. Where it is true that men in this church, in this culture or indeed anywhere in our sphere, have treated women with disdain or belittled them in their discipleship with Christ, then what Paul is saying here is a challenge. Jesus expected women to be grown-up Christians. They were in no sense any less “robed” in him than men. If any among us think that Christian women, merely because they are women, can be expected to reason in a shallow way, fold under pressure, gossip and be unreliable with sensitive issues, act frivolously with money or time, then we are not hearing what is being said here. Men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Greeks, anybody who is a follower of Jesus is meant to be grown-up and mature and ought to be expected to be such by their fellow brothers and sisters.

Dorothy Sayers wrote a remarkable essay entitled, “Are Women Human?” about 40 years ago commenting on this very thing. Here is a quote from that essay:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man [this Jesus]--there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized;... who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously;... who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman’s nature.

The point she was making is this: Jesus expected women to respond to him as Lord and to be serious about his entire program, to learn and act and think and believe as grown-ups. That is how Jesus treated women. “In Christ there is no male or female” as far as the call of the Lord to discipleship is concerned. That is a notion we need to hear. It is not that maleness and femaleness have ceased to exist in every sense, but that there is no distinction in the call of Christ to respond to his Lordship in our lives whether we are male or female.

Galatians 4 continues the theme of the importance of graduation, the importance of being mature. Another figure is used here:

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of the time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.

Paul takes a figure from his world, the Roman era, to illustrate his point here. Noble Roman households had Olympian figures as fathers, men who lived in a kind of transcendence above the ordinary, run-of-the-mill home life. Children were not raised by their fathers but rather by highly educated slaves who taught and directed them. Here Paul points out the irony of that kind of family situation; the son will someday be master of the estate, will some day actually own the slaves from whom he must now take direction. Meanwhile the slave is master over the son: he tells him when to go to bed, when to get up; he disciplines him. Thus for the young child there is very little difference between being an infant and being a slave. In fact, there is no appreciable difference between being a slave and being a son until the child reaches his majority. Then he becomes owner of the very slave from whom he took directions.

Paul is saying that the key point in this is to recognize that a date has been set by the father, so that a childhood that consisted of this kind of slavery, this kind of restriction, is pointing towards the fullness of time, the date set by the father when the child will be considered a grown-up and given adult freedom, adult responsibility, adult honor. In a spiritual sense, what happened to us is the Spirit of the Son of God entered our experience and began to encourage us, to entreat us to approach our Heavenly Father in a face-to-face relationship. The Father, then, is no longer an Olympian figure to us. Rather he is now someone whom we address as “Abba, Father.” He is now my Father and he expects me to act like a man. I can know and be known by him. I can relate to him and understand him as I take on the burdens of adulthood. I can have a heart like his and a concern for the world like he has. I am no longer a slave but a son, a grown-up son, an heir who is entitled to inherit all the richness of the promises of Abraham. Thus, we are being urged to graduate as Christians and stop living like children.

Paul uses another interesting word here, the word “stoicheon.” It is translated “elemental” things, that is, elementary, immature, inadequate, weak, powerless and valueless things, systems devoid of power and authority. In Galatians 4:3 Paul used that word, “stoicheon,” “elemental things,” with regard to the Law, which, he says, was a system that was meant for children, not for grown-ups. Later (Gal. 4:9), he uses the same word to describe the pagan world (not the Jews but the

pagans), recalling that “You were restrained under those which by nature are no gods themselves.” They lived under superstition rather than under Law. But in either case, Jews or Greeks, those who are raised with the Old Testament Law or those who came out of pagan idolatry, both labored under a system that restricted them; both had a system that was elementary, inadequate and immature; while both of them ought to grow up and become whole, free sons of God.

If you have had any experience at all with children you will know that children are the most rule-conscious tyrants imaginable. We have a four-year-old who has laid down rules about everything. He considers it an outrage if he is served his cereal in anything but the “green bowl.” It defies his sense of propriety to be treated differently. This is a rule with him. He made it himself, and everybody has to agree with it. Also, everybody has assigned seats at the table. If anybody tries to sit down to dinner in the wrong chair, he is outraged. That is breaking the rules, he informs us in shrill tones, He ought to be free to eat cereal in a bowl other than the “green bowl”--to know that nothing bad would happen were he to do so--but he does not have that freedom. He has a rule, which is his attempt to make sense out of the life that he lives.

Children are not only the most rule-conscious of people, they are also the most superstitious. It is common knowledge around our house that nobody is safe going to sleep with the closet door open. Why is that? What sort of dangers will proceed from the closet? I don’t know, but a superstition exists in the minds of our children that they are much safer sleeping in a room with the closet shut.

Paul is saying that superstitions, fables, strange restrictions that people build into their lives are elementary, childish and inadequate. They will not bear the weight of adult living. Rules too are inadequate. All the lock-step requirements of rules that children build into their lives are inadequate for adult living. We were not meant to live like that. We were meant to eat cereal out of any color bowl. Various arbitrary requirements should not occupy our spiritual lives. They are wrong. We were meant to be grown-ups, graduates, heirs of the promises of Abraham, to stand on our feet and gaze at our Heavenly Father and say, “Abba, Father,” to receive from him the burdens that burden him, to have a heart like his, to love like he loves, to pursue holiness in a broken world because he values holiness.

We are free to live life in a topsy-turvy world, free from the fear of constantly breaking the rules. We were meant for freedom. We were meant to be grown-ups. We ought to be graduates: “That we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

At the end of this section Paul raises a fear. He says, “I’m afraid, despite the awful inadequacy of the elementary things, I’m afraid that you are going to go back into routines that reek of bondage and prison. Drill instructors are necessary for juveniles, but they are not necessary for those who have learned the lesson and graduated. What a horrible thought--to go back under that kind of slavery, ‘days and months and seasons and years,’ as if you were so many astrologers whose lives were restricted by bizarre superstitions dictated by the different configurations of the stars. Perhaps you are burdened by various rules--rules about forms of worship, how you should act on Sundays or weekdays, rules about living the Christian life, whatever. Perhaps you have a kind of ‘TV Guide’ routine about your life that is dry and lifeless, a routine that forbids freedom, that allows for no touch of the Spirit. You are not doing battle in any great spiritual battlefield, rather you are tiptoeing around, afraid to step over a line. It seems to me that you who once were grown-ups are going back under slavery.”

“You Galatians have been called to graduate,” Paul declares, “to live life with the Spirit of God himself walking in your steps, fighting battles that are worth fighting, challenging a world system that needs to be challenged, facing foul habits in your life that need to be dealt with. You are called to be free people, grown-ups, heirs, rich, responsible.” Do you see the

argument the apostle is making? Why would anybody who has graduated ever want to go back? Why would anybody who has become a grown-up ever want to act like a child?

That is the call that is laid before us here: to have the kind of Christianity that is vital, that every day becomes an opportunity to serve God. It has a living Lord in the midst of it, so that where we work, where we shop, when we interact with people the Lord is there. We should sense our responsibility because adulthood means responsibility; and, having received our inheritance, we should rejoice in our freedom. What a terrible thing it would be to have prison descend on us again, to act like infants, to go back to boot camp!

This is a great challenge. We are currently living in June 1984, graduation month. The challenge of the Lord is, will we be spiritual grown-ups? Will we receive our diplomas? Will we become graduates and act like grown-ups? Or will we go back into a system that is protected and restricted and childlike? Let us ask the Lord to give us the strength to be warriors, grown-ups, soldiers, made ready for the real world in which we live.

Lord, we are easily fooled, duped by the lies of the enemy. We fall asleep at times and fail to see the dangers. Thank you that there are moments like this as your Word penetrates us, as we hear its message; moments when we realize the importance of the issues that are at stake. Help us to be spiritual graduates, to live life like grownups, to fight the fight that is worth fighting, to be serious about our faith and to act in a mature way, the Spirit of your Son in our hearts granting us intimacy with you, oneness with each other, and a serious Christianity about all our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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