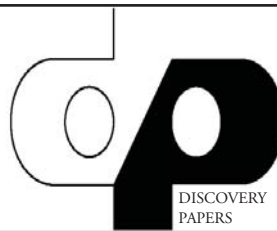


ARE YOU MY FATHER?

SERIES: FROM BUMPER CARS TO CARNIVAL SWINGS



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Galatians 1:1-10
1st Message
Paul Taylor
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A mother bird sat on her egg ... The egg jumped ... "Oh, oh!" said the mother bird. "My baby will be here! He will want to eat. I must get something for my baby bird to eat!" she said. "I will be back!" So away she went.

Out came the baby bird! "Where is my mother?" he said. He looked for her. "I will go and look for her," he said. So away he went. The baby bird could not fly.

He could not fly, but he could walk. "Now I will go and find my mother," he said. He did not know what his mother looked like. He went right by her. He did not see her.

He came to a kitten. "Are you my mother?" he said to the kitten. The kitten just looked and looked. It did not say a thing. The kitten was not his mother, so he went on.

Then he came to a hen. "Are you my mother?" he said to the hen. "No," said the hen. The kitten was not his mother. The hen was not his mother. So the baby bird went on. "I have to find my mother!" he said. "But where? Where is she? Where could she be?" [...]

Just then, the baby bird saw a big thing. This must be his mother! "There she is!" he said. "There is my mother!" But the big thing just said, "Snort."

"Oh, you are not my mother," said the baby bird. "You are a Snort. I have to get out of here!"¹

So what about you? Do you ever feel like this baby bird? Do you ever wonder where you fit in? Do you feel like you fit in here? Like you fit in within your family? Like you fit in at work? Listen to people's questions. Listen to our world. I think you'll find that one of the questions that people are asking—one of the primary questions that we are asking—is "where do I fit?" That question of "where do I belong?" runs deep in all of our hearts. I think it might be the main question that people in our culture are asking: Christians, atheists, elementary kids, soccer moms, and big-shot executives. We're all asking: "Where do I belong?" "Where do I fit?"

This morning, we're starting a series looking at a letter that was written to address this very question. And I have to say that I'm really excited to be looking at this book together for the next two months. I've been preparing this series pretty much all year and I'm convinced that God has some really powerful things to say to us: to Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto in 2008. I think God wants to help us to think differently about each other and about how the gospel affects the way we think about this church and this community. The cool thing about studying Galatians is that it's one of the first books addressing the issue of what it looks like to be a church. It's probably the earliest book of the New Testament that we have—written earlier than even the gospels. It was written only about fifteen years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. So

the churches it was written to were really young in trying to figure out this whole church thing. And it was critical that these first churches get it right because if they blew it, if they didn't get right what it meant to follow Jesus together, then everything was at risk. They had the chance to make it or break it.

Galatians is an exciting book about this new movement called the church and whether it can really survive the realities of life. That's one of the reasons many people love this book. A lot of you have probably heard it preached or studied it yourself. As we look at it these next two months, we're going to take a little bit of a different approach. First of all, we're going to be moving pretty fast. We'll cover the whole book in seven sermons. So we're not going into every last detail. My hope is that we will be confronted with the big picture message of Galatians at the end of this series. I want you to get to the end of this series and have an idea of what Galatians as a whole is about.

But we're also going to be drawing some different applications from the book. This book is often read mostly in terms of how it affects an individual's relationship to God, and there are really powerful and important ideas in this book about how we relate to God as individuals. But as we read it in this series, I will be drawing our attention to the social dynamics with which Paul is concerned. This includes not just how we relate to God as individuals but also what impact the gospel has on us as a community. I think these social dynamics were really important to Paul and they are often overlooked, so I'm going to be consistently highlighting them as we work our way through the book.

So you might hear some new stuff that you haven't heard before—I hope you will. And you might not hear some of the things that you are expecting to hear. But stay with us. As I said earlier, I'm convinced that God has something really exciting for us as we study this book.

We'll start by looking at the first ten verses of this book as a kind of introduction to the book. I'd like to read these verses from my own very interpretive translation as a way of getting us into this book. I'm a little hesitant to do this because I know enough Greek to know that I'm no Greek scholar, and what I'm offering is in no way meant to be a superior translation to what teams of scholars have come up with. But I think it might be helpful for us to read the passage in slightly more natural language so we can really get a feel for what Paul is trying to communicate to the Galatians. So here's Galatians 1:1-10.

From Paul, an apostle. But keep in mind that I didn't become an apostle because any person thought I should be one or because some person

made me one, but because Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead appointed me as an apostle. And this letter doesn't just represent my views, but the views of the whole family of faith who are with me right now. To the various churches in the region of Galatia. May you experience the grace and peace that comes from being in a relationship with God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ 4 who gave up His life so that our sins would not be remembered. Because of this forgiveness, we don't have to experience the rampant evil that characterizes the time in which we live. God our Father wants to spare us that pain. What an incredible God we have for all eternity. Amen.

I could hardly believe when I heard the news that after such a short time you were thinking of abandoning God who reached out to you and offered you a new relationship with Him just by believing in Jesus. Instead of responding to Him, you are becoming convinced by some other version of the gospel message. But don't be fooled: it's not another version of the gospel, it's just pure lies. You see, there are some people who are causing trouble for you because they want to change the way that you think about relating to God by knowing Christ. Even if we tell you something different or if an angel comes down from heaven and tells you something different about what God has done to restore His relationship with you, don't fall for it. That person deserves to be tortured forever. I just said this, but it's so important I want to say it again: if anyone tells you something about relating to God that doesn't agree with what we told you, he deserves to be tortured forever. Come on, you know me better. Do you think that I'm worried about what people think or about what God thinks? Do you think my goal is to get people to like me? If I were still worried about what people thought about me, I certainly wouldn't be preaching about Christ, that's for sure!

Now, it's clear as you begin the book of Galatians that Paul has a strong sense of urgency. He seems very concerned that the Galatians are headed off course. And he seems to be writing this letter to help them correct their course. He states their problem clearly in verse 6. The NIV reads, "you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." These Galatians are turning away from God, a person, in favor of another gospel, a false philosophy. Just like the baby bird, they have fallen out of their nest and forgotten who their Father is. So Paul writes this book to get them back on course, to bring them back to God as their Father. So to understand this book, we need to get a grasp on what the original gospel they heard meant to them and what this false gospel is that they are turning to. We need to start with some basic questions: what's the gospel, how they have misunderstood it, and how Paul is trying to fix their understanding.

The Garden Was Good

The story begins a long, long time ago. It begins with God. He created a garden and put two people in this garden. Adam and Eve didn't ask where they fit in the world because they knew where they fit. God, their father and creator, had told them. He told them what their responsibility was in this world, He told them how they were to relate to each other and the earth and the animals. Listen to how God explained to them where they fit. Genesis 1:27 reads, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" So things in the garden were good because God told Adam and Eve where they fit. And from this, we can see that God created people with the tendency to figure out who they are based on what others say about them. People are designed to understand who they are, to know what is essentially true about them, based on what someone outside of them tells them is true about them.

This might seem challenging in a culture where you are expected to "find yourself" apart from what anyone else says about you. But it shouldn't seem strange to us. Our children's book this morning suggests the same thing. And if you have kids or have ever been a kid yourself, you've seen this play out in real life. Kids look to their parents to figure out who they are. Think about how you think of yourself and how much of that comes from what your parents told you about who you were. I'm willing to bet that what your parents told you about who you are has had a huge impact on your life. It's very possible your parents had a negative impact on how you think about yourself. That's true for a lot of us. But whether it was positive or negative, it's hard to deny that what others tell us about us has a huge impact on how we think about ourselves.²

In the garden, this was good because that Other that spoke was God Himself. And life in the garden worked well. Really well. But then things got messy.

The Game of "Life Without God"

Most of you know what happened in that garden. Adam and Eve together rejected God. Their relationship with Him was forever damaged and He sent them out of the garden. And just like that baby bird, they became lost and confused. They were designed to determine their identity based on an Other, but their relationship with God was damaged. So they did the only thing they could do. They turned to other others. They chose the people around them to be the ones to tell them who they were. And they

listened to those voices. Because their relationship with God was damaged, people started to define themselves based on each other.

One of the first and best examples of this is a guy named Lamech who shows up in the fourth chapter of Genesis. He goes and marries two women instead of just one. And then he has this little tirade recorded in Gen 4:23-24: “Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.” Here’s a guy who doesn’t know who his father is. He doesn’t know who he is. All he can do is dominate his two poor wives, hurt other people, and compare himself to Cain. He’s desperate to figure out who he is and where he fits in this world. But because he’s lost his relationship with his father, the only option open to him is to define himself based on other people and do his best to come out on top. Does this guy remind you of anyone you know? Does he remind you of yourself at all?

This is the situation that we are left in after getting kicked out of the garden. I need to define myself by comparing myself to other people. There’s no absolute Father to tell me who I am. So I need you to tell me who I am. But here’s where it gets tricky. The only way I can feel okay about myself is to feel better than other people. But I need other people to tell me that I’m better. So I’m faced with a dilemma because other people are my stepping stones and my judges at the same time. So I start playing this game. A messy game with really high stakes, a game that doesn’t lead anywhere. The game of figuring out where I fit in comparison to someone else. The game of “life without God.”

Now think about how you might have seen this play out in your life. Imagine you walk into a room full of people you don’t know. What do you do? How do you feel about yourself? Is your tendency immediately to say, “Well, I’m taller than that person, but shorter than that guy over there.” Or “I’m better looking than him, but not as good looking as her.” Does this sound familiar to you at all? Think about the way you relate to people at work. Are there people that you feel superior to? Are there others you feel really inferior to?

When I was in middle school—I think it was seventh grade—we had a homeroom where we went for the first fifteen minutes of every day. And there was a particular group of students in my homeroom class that were kind of the cool kids. I’m not sure why my teacher allowed this, but this group of kids always sat in the back of room behind one of those blackboards on wheels. They even had a name for themselves: the Peanut Gallery. Now, I was not part of the Peanut Gallery because I wasn’t cool enough. Instead of sitting back there with them, I sat with my friend, Scott Wertkin. But one day, about halfway through the year, I got invited to become a part of the Peanut Gallery. They wanted me to sit with them. And so I did. I left the seat I used to sit in next to Scott Wertkin and joined the Peanut Gallery. I wish I could say that it was glorious to be a part

of the Peanut Gallery, but in reality, it wasn’t really all that exciting. In reality, it was pretty disappointing. But I didn’t go back to sitting with Scott Wertkin. Being a part of that group was too important to me. Why do these things matter so much to us?

This is what life is like when you have to play the world’s game. It’s feeling left out on the playground. It’s feeling inferior because you were passed up for a promotion. It’s racism. It’s classism. It’s genocide. It happens everywhere on all sorts of different levels. It happened in the churches of Galatia which is why Paul wrote them this letter. And I think it happens in some ways within our church, as well. All you have to do is ride in a car with me to see how I play the game. If I’m pulling up to a stoplight and there are two cars in my lane but only one in the other, I’ll move over as fast as I can. I’d much rather have only person in front of me than two. Driving can bring out the game in all of us. But there are deeper ways that we play the game with each other. That’s where we need God to help us. As we study through this book of Galatians, my prayer is that our eyes would be opened to the ways that we still play this game and that God would be healing us from that.

The Game of the Jews

One of the easiest ways for this to play out within a large group is the formation of an “in” group and an “out” group. This type of dynamic happens everywhere. At every church I’ve ever been a part of, I’ve heard people say that they don’t feel like they are part of the “in” group, that there’s some inner circle that they aren’t included in. They’re not invited to the Peanut Gallery. And that was the problem for the churches of Galatia. In the history of how God has interacted with his people, God’s Old Testament people, the Jews came up with a distinctly Jewish version of the game. And they got really good at it. They turned the gift of the Law and their identity as God’s people into something they could use to play this game of “who is worth more.”

The Law became the ultimate way to define who was “in” and who was “out.” The Jews who had the Law were the “in” group. The Gentiles who didn’t have the Law were the “out” group. So instead of following the Law as a way of testifying to who God is and drawing other people to Him, they used it to feel better than the Gentiles. No wonder they failed to attract people to God. Because the Law defined the Jews as the “in” crowd, but it also allowed individual Jews to demonstrate their superiority to other Jews. Even if you were a Jew and in the “in” group, you could be more “in” by following the Law better than the next guy. Those people who followed the Law the closest came out on the top, those people who didn’t manage to obey the Law very well were on the bottom.

By the time that Jesus came on the scene, certain people had become professional athletes in playing this game. This described a lot of the Pharisees. Listen to how this gets played out in Luke 18:10-13.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a

Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank that you I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Do you see how the Pharisee was playing the game? Praying *about himself* and comparing himself to everyone he was better than. But the tax collector, who was losing the game anyway, turned to God and asked for a restored relationship with Him. He asked to be excused from the game. So the Jews had turned the Law, they had turned their privileged relationship with God, into a way to win the game. They had invented Jewish-opoly: the Jewish version of the “life without God” game. They used religion to play the game.

Jesus Changes the Rules

But then Jesus comes on the scene and changes the rules. He’s different. He doesn’t seem to take notice of the “in” group. In fact, he criticizes them. He doesn’t seem bothered by the “out” group. In fact, he seems to genuinely love them. He seems like he’s not even playing the game. He seems to live by different rules. And yet, based on the rules, he’s actually winning. He’s followed the Law. He’s obeyed every commandment. He’s winning the game. But he’s treated as if he lost. He’s treated as the ultimate loser. He is the “out” group. He is rejected and despised. He is shamed, tortured, and publicly executed. His death is the ultimate humiliation.

Then He rose again. He defeated death. He broke apart the system of rules by which everyone else was playing. Even though He was winning, he was treated as a loser. And so he shattered the rules of the “life without God” game. He introduced a whole new set of rules—not a better way of playing the game, but a whole new way of living. Jesus redefined life. He offered eternal life.

In short, he re-introduced people to their Father. He offered a way for people to restore their relationship with the Father. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice, we regain our status as children of the Father. And like the baby bird, once we know who our Father is, all is set right. Once I realize that who I am is based on who my Father says I am, I don’t have to play the earthly game of competition and greed, comparing and evaluating. I’m finally free from that system.

Listen to how Paul puts it later on in this book in Galatians 3:26,28: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

All the things that were so commonly used to play this game don’t matter anymore. Ethnicity, social status, gender—it’s all irrelevant in terms of understanding your

true identity. You don’t need to use those things to play the game. You are all sons, *and daughters*, of God through faith in Christ Jesus. This is the message of the Christian gospel. Jesus has restored our relationship with the Father. So He determines our identity.

Think of the game as if you’re riding bumper cars. This is what the world is like. There are no rules, there’s no ultimate objective, there’s no relationship. It’s just trying to hit someone else as hard as you can. It’s just trying to bump others and avoid getting bumped yourself. But Christ saves us from living like bumper cars. The message of the gospel, of a reconciled relationship with the Father through Christ and made real to us by the Holy Spirit, is more like riding the carnival swings. You remember, the big center pole that turns with a bunch of swings hanging off the side. That’s what it looks like to be properly related to God as Father: all of us connected to Him and thus free to interact with each other not competitively but cooperatively, not using each other, but loving each other. That’s what the gospel does; it moves us from bumper cars to carnival swings.

The Game in Galatia

So now we can really understand what was going wrong in the Galatian churches. Paul’s gospel helped them understand who they were in light of their relationship with God as their Father. They were rightly aligned under Him: Jews and Gentiles worshipping together in the same community. But after Paul left, someone else came into those churches and said that that wasn’t the way it should be. They said that the Jews were the real people of God. They said that the Jews were still the “in” group, and the Gentiles had to be circumcised to become a part of God’s people. It wasn’t enough to have faith in Christ. Circumcision tells you who you are, not faith.

That’s why Paul sounds so urgent in this letter. This letter is an example of an ancient type of letter that scholars call “deliberative rhetoric.”³ The purpose of this kind of letter is to convince the recipients to take a single course of action. And the single course of action that Paul is arguing for here is that these Galatians not get circumcised. This is basically the whole purpose of the book of Galatians: don’t get circumcised. In fact, Paul claims that if they get circumcised they will have thrown out the very essence of the gospel. The whole gospel will have been ruined by that one simple action.

And the reason why getting circumcised was such a big deal for the Galatians was because it would amount to going back to playing the game that we’ve been talking about. They would be defining themselves based on their peers, playing the game of “life without God.” But that’s what the gospel had saved them from. The gospel saved them from playing the game. The gospel introduced them to a Father who was Father to all of them. And because they had a Father, they didn’t have to establish themselves through circumcision. There was no more “in” group. There was no more “out” group. There was just a family.

And they were already a part of it. So if they accepted circumcision, they would be forgetting about the gospel. They would be turning away from their Father. And they would be living by another gospel that wasn't really a gospel at all. The same old game that they had played before they knew Christ.

Paul says this in Galatians 4:8-9: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?"

Paul tells them that they know who their Father is now. Why would they trade a relationship with the Father for playing this ridiculous game that they could never win anyway? Why would you go back to "those weak and miserable principles"?

So now we need to ask the question, do we need this letter just as much as the churches in Galatia did? What we believe about the gospel is that it has restored our relationship with our Father and freed us from living like we're on bumper cars. We are free to act like we're riding carnival swings in this place. But do we? Do you feel like there is an "in" group at this church and you're not part of it? Maybe you've been church shopping—looking around to find the place that you really fit in—to find the place where you belong. Or maybe you're part of the "in" group and you don't realize how "out" so many people feel. Maybe you're young and feel like this church is a bunch of old people. Maybe you're old and feel like this church is a bunch of young people. Maybe you're single and feel like you can't fit in here because everyone is married. Maybe you're divorced and feel like it's not okay to be divorced in this place. There are plenty of things that we can use around here to create "in" groups and "out" groups. Any difference between you and me can become a card to play in this game that we've been talking about.

One of the dangerous things about a church community is that the same thing can happen to us that happened with the Jews. We can start to use religious activities as tools to play the game. We can use the things of God to play the "life without God" game. We can feel better than someone else because we lead a Bible study. We can pray for someone else who is struggling while feeling a sense of superiority and arrogance. Or we can feel like we don't belong because everyone here is too spiritual. Everyone here looks too good.

But that's why playing the game is so dangerous. When we're using each other to feel good about ourselves, or fixated on how other people make us feel bad about ourselves,

we leave no room for love. And what we have to offer the world, what the people of God have always had to offer the world, is a place where love is real, a place where people are free to love. And as we start to understand how our relationship with the Father frees us up to love other people, I think we'll start to see our relationships transformed. We'll think differently about people in this room. We'll think differently about our neighbors. We'll think differently about people in our city who are part of a different social class or ethnic background. We'll think differently about people around the world who live in different life circumstances. We'll start to move from living like bumper cars to living like carnival swings. That's where this letter is heading. That where this series is going. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ free us from playing the game and allow us to really love each other? How do we love?

So that's why I'm excited to study the book of Galatians together. And this is the course we'll be taking. We'll be trying to understand how the gospel works to bring us back to God. We'll try to understand how different things can creep into the life of our church that tempt us to go back to playing the game with God and with each other. And we're going to see how living the gospel ultimately frees us up to love each other, how the gospel changes us as a community. So as we study this book, my prayer is that we would be thinking about ourselves as a community. My prayer is that we would be willing to own up to some ways that we still play the game with each other. My prayer is that God would start to change our hearts and that we would be free to love each other.

What we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ is capable of transforming our relationships. When we know who our Father is, we start to realize what it means to have brothers and sisters, just like our baby bird. When we left this poor guy, he was wandering around, trying to find his mother. He's asked a duck, a cow, a truck, and a snort. But in the end he finds his mother. He realizes who he is. Listen to how his story ends. May this be our story as well.

Just then the mother bird came back to the tree. "Do you know who I am?" she said to her baby. "Yes, I know who you are," said the baby bird. "You are not a kitten. You are not a hen. You are not a dog. You are not a cow. You are not a boat, or a plane, or a Snort! You are a bird, and you are my mother."

NOTES

¹ From *Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman

² See Donald Miller, *Searching For God Knows What*, for a fuller discussion of these ideas.

³ See Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia*, for more on deliberative rhetoric.

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