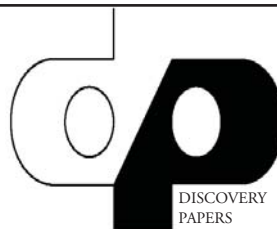


# A WAY TO GOD

**SERIES: FROM BUMPER CARS TO CARNIVAL SWINGS**



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Galatians 2:11-21  
3rd Message  
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I have a theory about how birth date affects one's ability to clap. To test it out, imagine that I divided a big group of people into two groups based on their birthdays. All those with birthdays on even days of the month would be in the "evens" group, and all those with birthdays on odd days of the month would be in the "odds" group. I would then pit them against each other in a little friendly competition to see who could clap the loudest and judge between the two to see if my theory was correct.

Imagining this situation, you can see just how easy it is to randomly split up a group into two sub-groups and create hostility between them. There have been lots of studies on this very topic—in elementary school classrooms, in college cultures, in the workplace. We feel pretty comfortable identifying very strongly with one group, especially when we stand in opposition to another group. All you have to do is turn on the TV to see what I mean. Chances are you'll see either a sporting event, a game show, or some reality TV competition. We love to identify with one group in opposition to another. It helps us answer our fundamental question of "where do I fit in this world?"

We're in the middle of a series reading through the book of Galatians. That question has been one of our guiding questions: "where do I fit?" This is the first Sunday here for a lot of college students in the area, and this is a particularly relevant question for them. I remember my freshmen year: asking lots of questions about who my friends would be and what groups I'd be a part of. But all of us ask this question of where we fit in among a group of new people.

We started this series in Galatians by talking about how the gospel has created a new community that is centered under God. We talked about how, apart from God, people in this world live like bumper cars. Without a frame of reference, we're forced to use each other to figure out where we belong: comparing and competing. But the gospel frees us from that. The gospel calls us to live like carnival swings. We know who we are because we are arranged under God as our Father. He gives us our identity, not other people, and that frees us up to love each other. God answers the question, "where do I belong?" The gospel creates a community in which we belong.

Last week we talked about how we know that this gospel message is really from God. We saw how Paul's testimony and experience with God demonstrated that his version of the gospel was a message from God. This morning, we're going to continue our discussion of the gospel. This gospel message comes from God, but it's the gospel message that gets us to God. Together. Not just me. This gospel message comes from God to us. And it brings us together to Him.

The gospel tells us where we belong.

Our passage this morning begins with the same story we ended with last week. When Peter, the apostle to the Jews, first visited the church at Antioch, he sat at the same table as the Gentiles. But then later he stopped eating with the Gentiles there. He thought he belonged with the Jews, not with those Gentiles. Paul challenged him, saying that his actions were inconsistent with the gospel. So this passage begins with a story of how the gospel affects a community with two very different groups. But by the end of this passage it seems that Paul is talking more generally and has left the story behind. Paul seems to flow seamlessly from his story into a more general articulation of the gospel. In fact, these verses are the most general description of the gospel that we have in Galatians. But we need to remember that Paul is explaining the gospel in this particular context. This isn't an entry in your Bible encyclopedia, filed under "g" for gospel. This is Paul explaining the gospel within the particular context of the issue between him and Peter. Whose table do you sit at? Jews or Gentiles? Where do you belong?

The whole passage is Galatians 2:11-21. But we're going to focus on the last section where Paul gets into his description of the gospel. I'll read from my own translation again. Here's Galatians 2:15-21.

**It's true that we are ethnically Jewish and not like the Gentiles who weren't given God's Law. But we know that no one is accepted into God's people by being Jewish. The only way is through believing in Jesus Christ. And even us Jews have believed in Jesus Christ so that we would be welcomed into God's people through faith in Christ instead of thinking that it's because we're Jewish. Again, no one is accepted into God's people by being Jewish. But if I've been accepted into God's kingdom by believing in Christ and then I start acting as if I were a Gentile, does that mean that Christ doesn't care how I act? Not a chance! That's the system that the gospel saved us from. If I try to rebuild that system, that's when I violate God's desire for His people. You see, the law itself is what killed me so that I would be dead and the law wouldn't apply to me anymore. Then God could raise me back to life so that I could follow Him rather than the law. It's like I died with Christ on the cross so the person who I am now isn't the old me. Now Christ is living His resurrected life through me, so that I am who I am now only because I've been changed by believing in the Son of God who loved me so much that He gave up His life in order to save mine. The last thing I want to do is reject God's free invitation to be**

**part of His people. Because when I try to be a part of God's kingdom by upholding the law, it's like spitting on Christ's dead body.**

## Faith Makes a New Family

Paul starts off this section by identifying the two groups that are the cause of the division in the Galatian churches. He's using some wordplay here. He says there are Jews and there are the Gentile sinners. The NIV puts this phrase in quotes: "Gentile sinners." Paul isn't saying that all Gentiles are sinners. He's not even talking about some sinners that happen to be Gentiles. He's using that term because the word "sinners" was often used as a derogatory term to refer to Gentiles as those people who had been excluded from the "in" group of holier-than-thou Jews. So it didn't really refer to their moral condition as much as to their social class. You can see the word used this way a lot in the gospels. In Luke 5:30, the Pharisees ask Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Again, the NIV puts this word in quotes because it's referring to a group of people by their social designation not by their moral quality. So we have two groups here in Galatia among whom the gospel is at work: the Jews and the Gentile sinners. The "evens" and the "odds."

He's talking about two groups. But what does he say to them? He says these groups don't matter anymore. In fact, in some ways, those two groups don't even exist anymore—that's going to be his main point in this section. He says that "a man is not justified by observing the Law." In my translation, I rendered that, "no one is accepted into God's people by being Jewish." This new people of God that the gospel has created didn't come about because they were Jewish. It came about through faith in Christ. Paul points out that even the Jews entered this new relationship with God through faith. Jewishness didn't get them justified. This new kingdom is built on faith: how you respond to Jesus Christ. Faith is how you belong in God's people.

Where do you look to make you feel like you belong? Do you look for people that are similar to you? Do you look for people that make you feel good about yourself? I definitely do those things. But what Paul is saying is that the gospel is forming a new community where those things don't matter. What matters is faith in Jesus. Faith brings us together. Faith makes us a new family.

There are no more Jews, there are no more Gentiles, there is only the new creation here: the church. This is a new community of faith in Christ, a new way of being the people of God on earth. The word used throughout the New Testament is *ekklesia*. This word is translated "church," but it's a new word. It hadn't been used that way before and it takes on really rich meaning in the New Testament. This is the new people of God on earth. It's this community that gathers its identity from faith in Christ alone. We call our college ministry here at PBC *ekklesia* because this is what we want to draw college students into: not just a campus fellowship, but God's *ekklesia*. The church.

So if you've ever been disappointed with your experience in a church, I'm not surprised. What would be a problem is if you hadn't ever been disappointed. That would mean your expectations were way too low. What is supposed to happen here is an incredible thing, and we'll never really realize it short of the final redemption. We are God's *ekklesia*. The new kingdom of God. His people on earth.

This is why here at PBC we've been moving towards trying to draw all of our people into our main worship service. It's why we've converged the styles of our worship services. We believe in the possibility of all of us worshipping together, even if we don't have exactly the same music tastes or worship style preference. We want our worship services to reflect this oneness that is characteristic of God's *ekklesia*. We want all of us together in the same place, worshipping as one. It might not be as comfortable as worshipping only with similar people, but it's richer. This new community is what the gospel has created.

The high school I attended as a freshman drew students from two different middle schools. When two different groups of kids started attending the same high school, we all knew who was from Coleytown Middle School (that was mine) and who was from Bedford Middle School. Even when I hear that name, almost twenty years after high school, the words just sound foreign. Bedford Middle School. They were the "other" people. But high school was a new thing, or it should have been. We weren't in middle school anymore. But we carried those middle school distinctions with us for a long time. We may have eventually made friends with new people, but that middle school identity never really faded from view.

This is what has happened in Galatia. Even after these Jews and Gentiles came together in the church, they still didn't feel like they fit together. Now, it's interesting to note who Paul addresses at the beginning. I've said that I understand the whole purpose of Paul's writing this letter to be convincing the Gentiles of Galatia not to get circumcised. He tells them that if they get circumcised, they will be returning to this "game" that the world plays of comparison, competition, and figuring out who you are based on how you fit among other people. So the people that he is trying to convince not to be circumcised are the Gentiles. But when he gets to this point and starts really explaining the gospel in very clear terms, he doesn't start with the Gentiles. He doesn't start with explaining how they don't need to get circumcised because they don't need to play the game. He starts with the Jews. He uses this story of his conflict with Peter as a bridge into talking about the gospel from a Jewish perspective. So why does he start with "we who are Jews by birth"? Why does he start with the Jews?

I think he begins with them because Paul recognizes

that when there are two groups in a community, one will inevitably have more social power than the other. And I'm not necessarily using power in a negative sense. Because of how power has historically been abused, the very word "power" sounds dirty and evil. But you can just think of it as "influence." Paul understands that in any community, some people have more influence to change things and others have less influence. And in the community that he is writing to, it's the Jews who have more influence. Christ came to the Jews, and this new people of God was formed out of the history and legacy of God's relationship with the Jews, so they have more social power in this early Christian community. And so he begins by talking to them.

Paul talks to the Jews first because in terms of this issue of whether the Gentiles need to get circumcised, the Jews are the ones who need to let up. He wants the Gentiles to understand that they don't need to get circumcised, but he wants the Jews to understand that it is because of their social influence that the Gentiles are even considering this. So in a large measure, the burden of responsibility for making bridges between two groups of people lies on the people with more social influence. That's why Paul starts with the Jews.

How does this play out for us? What about within this church? If we're talking about ways that we can welcome our recovery community into the main body of our congregation, where does the burden of responsibility fall? Which of those groups has more social influence? What about some of the other groups that may feel less like a central part of things here: people in middle and high school, elderly people, ethnic minorities. Where does the burden of responsibility fall for building bridges? What about outside of our church? On the whole, we are a wealthy, well-educated, successful group of people. How might we build bridges with people from different groups in our community? Where does the burden of responsibility fall?

You might be saying that you don't have influence as part of one of these groups. You might feel like other people always have the power. But each of us has influence in some context. Each of us operates in some community—our family, our school, our workplace, or our community—where we have some level of social influence. Let's think about how to use that to build bridges.

I'm acutely aware of how this is true for myself. I'm a pastor in this church. I come from a pretty well-off family. I'm white. I'm male. By just about any distinction you can draw, I come out on the side of having more social influence than other people. And I understand that to mean that it is my responsibility to build bridges. It is my responsibility to reach out. That's a big part of why we live where we live. It's a big part of why our kids are in a bilingual program learning Spanish. We are aware of the social influence we have in our community and we want to find ways to build bridges. If you've seen the Spiderman movies, you're familiar with Uncle Ben's famous phrase that drives Peter Parker to use his abnormal power to fight

crime: "with great power comes great responsibility." What power do you have? What would it look like for you to take Uncle Ben's phrase to heart? Who can you reach out to? Where can you build bridges?

Paul goes on to talk in more detail about how these bridges are built. He begins by saying that the gospel of Christ, this message of faith in Jesus, has created a new thing out of two old categories. But what happens when those old categories persist like they did for me in high school? What then? How do you forget those old distinctions?

## New People Don't Need Old Categories

Paul addresses this question by starting with the Jews again. In verse 17, he says, "If while we seek to be justified in Christ." In other words, if we're trying our best to live out this new church thing based on faith in Christ as the thing that identifies us, but "it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners." Remember, Paul has used the word "sinners" earlier to refer to the social class of the Gentiles, not their moral conditions. There were two groups—Jews and Gentiles—and a third new creation—the church, the *ekklesia*. Now he says, if we're trying to live like the church, what happens if I (who used to be in this Jewish category) now look like I actually fit in this "sinner" category? What does it mean if my actions make me look like a Gentile? Does that mean that God doesn't care about how I act? That behavior doesn't matter to God?

In typical Paul style, he answers his own question with a resounding, "no way!" In fact, God cares a lot about how you act. What really matters to him is how you view these categories of people and how you view Him in your life. If I go back to being fixated on these categories of Jews and Gentiles, if I "rebuild what I destroyed" as the NIV puts it, then that's what God cares about it. And he uses a new word here that the NIV translates "lawbreaker." That's the real sin. That's the real error. This is why he uses this wordplay with "sinner" and now a different word "lawbreaker." He's saying that it isn't being a Gentile that makes you a sinner. It's focusing on these old categories. That's the real sin here. That's what the gospel has saved us from. It's not that God doesn't care how you act, it's just that you misunderstand what actions He cares about. He doesn't care about whether you eat pork. He cares about how you treat people who are different than you. He cares about whether this new community, this new creation can get along. He cares about whether the new people of God can learn to love each other.

It's fun to have a little friendly competition between "evens" and "odds" in church. It would even be appropriate to have a little friendly banter about how much louder people who were born on even days can clap or how much clearer the sound is from people who were born on odd days. I'll fess up: I'm an "odd." That's my group. But I think you'd all agree that if I went out and slashed your tires right after service because you were an "even," I'd be taking this thing a little too far. Those two categories of

“even” and “odd” don’t really matter. That’s all over now. It was fun while it lasted, but it’s all over now.

That’s what Paul is saying here. If you’re still fixated on whether you’re acting like a Jew or a Gentile, you’ve missed the boat. Those categories don’t matter anymore. If you’re still worried about where this person went to middle school, you’ve missed the boat; you’re in high school now, act like it. You’re part of the church now. You’re part of God’s New People. And new people don’t need old categories.

Jesus says something similar about the new era that His arrival has introduced. He says you don’t put a new patch on an old shirt. Both the patch and the shirt will be ruined. You don’t put new wine into an old wineskin. Both the wine and the wineskin will be ruined. You don’t use old categories in the new people of God. The categories don’t apply and you’ll only ruin the experience of the new people. New people don’t need old categories.

So what does this say to us? How have we taken old categories and imported them into our experience of this new community? What are some of the categories that we still see as really important and significant in this place, but that shouldn’t be that way? The worst part is that we don’t just take old categories into this new thing called church, we invent categories that only apply in this place. We treat people who serve in ministry as if they were more of an “in” crowd that those that don’t. We treat people who are having significant personal problems with self-control or relationships as the “out” crowd. We have some picture of what a Christian family is supposed to look like and we judge how other people fit in depending on how well their family matches up to this standard. Or I judge myself because I know I can never fit in because my life can never look like what a Christian’s life is like. All of this is crazy. It’s all like acting as if what middle school I went to still defines me., as if my being an “odd” is the most important thing about my identity.

We are a new people. The old categories don’t matter anymore. We don’t need them. But we like them. They make us feel comfortable. And sometimes it is hard to let go of these categories that have been so significant for us our whole lives. And that’s where Paul goes next. How do you let go? How do reach out? How does God enable us to do this?

## God Is Our Vanishing Point

He doesn’t make it easy, but He makes it possible. And He makes it worthwhile. In the last part of this passage, Paul gets personal. This is the conclusion of Paul’s testimony of his own experience with the gospel. And he concludes by saying that when he started to follow Christ, it felt like dying. He was winning the game under all the old rules. The old categories were working fine for him. But then he got invited into a new thing. He got invited into God’s new family. And he was asked to give up the old categories. But Paul had always been a Jew. He was more Jewish-er than anyone! That was who he was. But

he had to give that up. He says that he died to the Law. When he started to follow Christ, a part of him died. Those old categories that used to define him, that part of him, died.

That’s the invitation that we have. Losing these old categories can feel like dying. In this place, we don’t think of ourselves as old or young, rich or poor, from the recovery community or main congregation. Even thinking in those categories is missing the boat. We come here and we let go of those categories. But I like thinking of myself as a pastor. I like the categories that I use to define me. Letting go of these old categories feels like dying. And it is dying. A part of our identity is going away. Part of us is dying.

But, it’s not just dying, because in its place is a new kind of life. Paul says that he died to the law so that he could live to God. And so when we die with Christ, we are raised up with Him to life. In place of our old categories, we are given a new life to live in a new family of God. And that’s the message that Paul is trying to get across to these people in Galatia trying to figure out how to live together as Jews and Gentiles. Don’t live for the old categories. New People don’t need old categories. Live to God.

Living for God means making him a reference point for our lives. It means He is the one that tells us our lives have meaning. It means that He is the one who tells us who we are, not our ethnicity or social status or gender or anything else. The field of art was revolutionized in the early 15th Century when medieval artists starting using the concept of perspective in their paintings. The simple idea was that there would be a vanishing point to which all lines in the painting would point. This gave art a sense of realistic depth for the first time, and by the end of the century, just about every artist was incorporating perspective into their art. Artists started incorporating checkerboard floors in a lot of their works just to show off their newfound skills in perspective.

This is what it looks like to live our lives for God. He becomes the vanishing point. God is our vanishing point. All that we do, all of our interactions with people, all of our decisions are made in the context of our relationship with Him. He is the vanishing point in my painting of the world. All those old categories vanish when you start to live to God, when you see Him as the one who forms your primary identity. Who are you? You’re one of His people. That’s what is first about you. That is who you are. Old categories don’t matter anymore. They’ve all vanished into God. God is our vanishing point.

When we understand ourselves in this way, we can start to see other people in much richer detail, as well. When I look at you, I don’t see a competitor in the game. I see a brother in my family. When God is our vanishing point, we see others in all three dimensions. We don’t have to fixate on old categories, like that person is young, that person is old, that person is black, that person is homeless. We can see people. God has given us perspective, and people come alive. This is a person with a history and a personality and someone that God’s Holy Spirit is wooing to Himself. When we live to God, we can finally start to

love other people.

So think about the context you are in and what it means to start seeing people with God as your vanishing point. If you're a college freshman, what would it look like to see all the new people you're meeting in light of your relationship with God? With Him as your vanishing point? If you're a professional, what would it look like to see the people you work with, your boss, people that work for you, your customers, everyone, with God as your vanishing point? What would it look like to see people in this room in that way? What would it look like to relate to these people with God as your vanishing point? How would that change the way you think about other people? How would it free you up to love them?

This is the message of the gospel. The gospel brings us together under God. The gospel is our way to God. We don't have to live by old categories. We don't have to play the game. We can live to Him. He forgives my sin. He invites me into a completely undeserved relationship. He makes us a family. He is my vanishing point. So "evens" and "odds" both belong in this place. Jews and Gentiles both belong here. Young people and old people both belong here. Ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities belong here. This is God's new family. And it is defined by faith, not by race or gender or age or musical preference or the date of your birthday.

So let's welcome each other into this place. Some of you have more ability to do that than others. Some of you have more social influence. A larger part of the burden falls on you. But all of us have social influence in some context. All of us can welcome people who are different than us into something. All of us can open up the message of the gospel to someone.

If you remember, Paul's whole summary of the gospel here began with a very practical issue. Who do you eat with? Often, groups of inclusion and exclusion are seen most powerfully around food. Food brings people together, but food keeps people apart as well.

And that's the reason for communion. Because when we come together as a community to God's table to share in His meal, we proclaim this message of the gospel that Paul wants so desperately for us to understand. What we do together says everything what I just said in a physical, visceral, symbolic way. When we come together at the Table, when we eat together, we acknowledge that old categories don't matter. We acknowledge that faith in Jesus Christ is what brings us together as a family. And we proclaim that we are living to God. He is our vanishing point at this table.

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