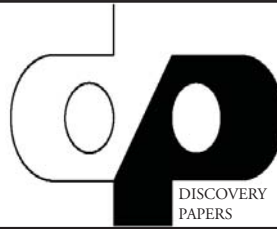


GOOD FENCES MAKE BAD NEIGHBORS

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



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Galatians 3:1-4:31
4th Message
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Last week we started out our message with a clapping contest. I decided to get a little more sophisticated this week. I'd like to start by reading a passage from a poem by Robert Frost. It's called "Mending Wall" and the first part of it talks about a rock wall between two neighbors that keeps falling down so that every year they have to repair it, until one of the neighbors starts to wonder why they need it at all. I'm picking it up about halfway through.

*There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows?
But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me—
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."¹*

Good fences make good neighbors. Or do they? You can hear a sadness in this poem. These people don't understand each other. There is this wall between them and each year they rebuild it, but their relationship suffers. In truth, good fences make bad neighbors. I think that's the point of this poem: good fences make bad neighbors. And that is, in large part, the point of the passage in Galatians that we are going to look at today.

Today we're starting a two-week look at the middle section of the book of Galatians, chapters 3 and 4. We'll look at these two chapters together this week and next week from two different perspectives. Remember what is going on in the churches of Galatia. These were some of the first churches to experience a mixed community of worshippers: Jews and Gentiles together. They had heard the gospel that Paul preached to them and they had come together under God as their Father. They were united as a community because of their relationship with Him.

But then some people started spreading the idea that the Gentiles had to become like the Jews in order to really be a part of God's people. They had to get circumcised. And Paul writes this letter to convince them that that isn't the case. That in fact, if they do that, they'll be abandoning the very heart of the gospel.

But he realizes that he is talking God's people out of identifying with the Jewish Law. That's like trying to talk a Texan out of wearing boots. (Which is, by the way, why I don't really consider myself a Texan.) The Law had been essential to how God's people understood themselves for almost 1500 years. So if Paul is going to say that the Law isn't necessary for this new people of God, he has to explain why. He does so in chapters 3 and 4. He is explaining why the Law was given and why it isn't needed anymore.

What he concludes about the Law is that it was meant to lead God's people to Christ. In 3:19 he says, "the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ." Or, to say it a different way, God's desire was to have an intimate relationship with His people. They weren't ready, so he gave them some rules to protect them until they were ready and prepare them for the time when they would be ready. God gave His people the Law to prepare them for an intimate relationship with Him. Next week we're going to focus on how Christ frees us up for an intimate relationship with God. This week we're going to talk about how the Law prepared us for that and how easy it is to return to the Law instead of embracing the relationship that we've been given now.

"To Protect and to Prepare"

As we look at this, it's helpful to think about the law as a fence. Early Rabbis actually talked about the law this way. What do fences do? What does the law do? It protects us. Why do a lot of counties prohibit fireworks? Because they are dangerous. Laws protect us from dangerous activity. What is the motto of the police, our Law Enforcement Agency? "To Protect and to Serve." Laws protect people.

So the Law is a fence that protects God's people. But the point that Paul wants to make in these chapters is that the law was temporary. It protected God's people, but it also prepared them for the time when it wouldn't be needed anymore. Look at all the references that Paul makes to the temporary nature of the Law. 3:19, "until the Seed ... had come"; 3:23, "before this faith... until faith should be revealed"; 3:25, "no longer under the supervision"; 4:2, "until the time set by his father"; 4:4, "when the time had fully come"; 4:7, "no longer a slave." Paul is clearly drawing a distinction between two times. The Law existed during an earlier time, but things have changed.

The Law was temporary; it was meant to prepare God's people for Christ.

Thus we have this dual purpose for the Jewish Law. The Law protects and prepares. Moses might have engraved this motto around the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were recorded: "to protect and prepare." I said that you can think of the law as a fence. When I drive home on Middlefield, I pass this empty lot just past the Toyota dealership with a huge metal construction fence around it. Why? Because empty lots can be dangerous, I suppose. So the fence protects people from harm. But that fence won't be there forever; it will be taken down when there is some type of development on that land. The fence is only there to protect people until they don't need that protection anymore. That fence is there to protect and to prepare.

Like that fence on Middlefield, the Jewish Law has a temporary function. It won't be needed forever. And yet, as we talk about the Law, I think we'll see that we find it hard to let go of law. Something within us likes a fence. We're like that neighbor, carrying rocks in our hands, rebuilding our fences, oblivious to the fact that we might not even need a fence. We like to be protected. We like to have clear boundaries about what we should do and what we shouldn't do. We like to know who is on our side of the fence and who is on the other. We like to know who is "in" and who is "out." So we're drawn to fences as a way of living our lives. And even once they've been torn down, we're tempted to rebuild them. For the community in Galatia, that fence was the Jewish Law. But we have all sorts of fences.

So, if today's message has one main point, it has to do with our tendency to live behind fences. Good fences make bad neighbors. My encouragement for us today is not to live behind our fences. There's a line in the movie *Cars* where Mater, the tow truck, is talking to Lightning, the race car. Lightning has been impounded and Mater isn't supposed to be talking to him. So the Sheriff asks Mater, "Mater! What did I tell you about talking to the accused?" And Mater sheepishly answers, "to not to." Well, if someone asks you, "What did Paul say about living behind fences?" you should answer "to not to." Don't live behind a fence.

The Law Protects Us from God

If we're going to talk about not living behind fences, we need to know what purpose they serve and why we don't need them now. What did Paul say about why God gave His people the law? God gave His people the Law as a fence, partly to protect them from Himself. But that protection is not needed anymore. Listen to what he says in Galatians 3:19-22:

So why on earth did God give His people a law, then? Well, it was given so that God's people would recognize how their actions contradicted their relationship with Him. But it was only temporary, only in effect until the child of Abraham would arrive and fulfill the promise.

Remember that the law was given through angels who acted like a mediator when they dictated the law. But you don't need a mediator if there's only one person and God is only one person. So the law was a kind of arrangement between God and His people. You might ask whether the law took the place of the promise that God had already made with Abraham? Of course not - we already said that was impossible. If God had given His people a law that was able to help them to experience real life, then they would have been able to enter His kingdom through that law. But the Scripture points out that the law only proves that everyone is guilty of breaking it. Therefore, the promise has to be fulfilled by believing in Jesus Christ. That makes it available to anyone who believes.

The Law was a fence. We'll see how it was given to protect God's people from Himself. But it's not needed anymore. We don't have to relate to God through a fence anymore. Don't keep God behind a fence. How does the Law protect us from God? Look at why God gave the Law again. The NIV for 3:19 reads "It was added because of transgressions." I translated it, "it was given so that God's people would recognize how their actions contradicted their relationship with Him." Here's the basic idea: the Law was given to help us identify sin.

You can see this play out in the story of the giving of the Law in Exodus. We see a pattern of the people doing things and then God giving them laws to tell which of the things they just did was wrong. For instance, while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the first edition of the Ten Commandments, the people thought it would be a good idea to build a golden calf and worship it. Right after that story, God gives them what is called the priestly code. You see, they did what came naturally to them, and then God had to give them Law to help them know that some of the things they did weren't in line with their relationship with God.²

If you think about it, this is how most laws come about. When Rachel and I first got married, we didn't have a rule about having toys at the dinner table. But then we had kids and their instinct told them that playing with toys while they were eating was a great idea. But we quickly realized that it wasn't. So now we have a rule. This is how law comes about. Law helps to us know what we shouldn't do.

So how did this protect Israel from God? Because when the people did these things, God got angry. You can see examples of God's anger all throughout the Old Testament. At one point the ground opened up and swallowed people. Understanding God's anger is one of the harder things to get our mind around. But it helps to realize that the Law was given to protect God's people from His anger. This is why the Jews

thought of the Law as a gift. The nations around them had gods that were angry too. The gods of the nations would send plagues and droughts and disasters, and nobody would know why. But the Jews knew what made God angry—they had it written down. The other nations had to guess what their gods wanted. The God of Israel gave His people a Law. They knew what He expected of them.

So the fence protected God's people from Himself. But as Frost pointed out, fences don't really lead to relationship. They may protect you from each other, but they don't foster intimacy. And this isn't the way God wanted to relate to His people. He wants to relate to them in freedom and intimacy. But they weren't ready. So God gave His people the law to protect them until they could relate to Him intimately. Laws don't lead to intimate relationship. Laws protect a relationship, but they don't establish it. That's why we can't keep God behind a fence. We can't be close with him if there is a fence between us.

My question for you is how do you hide behind a fence as you relate to God? How are you still living like you need a fence to protect you from God? Are you afraid of God's anger? Are you afraid that if you do what you really want to do, that if you don't lead that Bible Study, or you don't attend that meeting, or you sleep in instead of praying, that God will say, "Aha! I knew it—now I've got you!" Think about this. Are you afraid of God's anger?

One of the ways I think I can fence myself off from God is not to "show up" with Him. I'll talk to him throughout the day. I'll pray for people and for things that are going on in my life. But I can be hesitant to just bring him whatever I'm thinking or feeling. Sometimes my feelings seem immature or selfish or silly. What if I'm angry at God? What if I'm lonely and I blame Him? What if I'm frustrated with Him and am impatient of His timing? One of the things I love about reading some of the Old Testament saints is that they weren't afraid to bring these things before God. Jeremiah and Job and David—they all get angry and impatient and accusatory with God. But too often I'm afraid to be that raw. What if He gets angry?

That's living behind a fence. And that fence limits my intimacy with God. It means that I only bring Him the parts of me that I think He'll like. I protect myself from Him. But what I don't realize is that the fence is down. We'll see next week that God's anger is spent. Christ became the object of His anger so that we don't have to fear it. We are free to relate to God as who we are, without pretenses or fear of His anger. God isn't afraid of our anger. He's not afraid of our impatient, bitter, cursing hearts. He wants all of us. We'll talk more about what that looks like next week as we try to see what lies beyond the fence. But for today, I want to encourage us not to put God behind a fence.

The Law Protects Us from Each Other

The Law isn't just a fence that protects us from God. The Law is also a fence that protects us from each other. Just

like the law allows us to relate to God without making Him angry, the Law allows us to relate to each other without hurting each other. But once again, it doesn't lead us to intimacy with each other. The law protects us from hurting each other, but it doesn't help us to love each other.

Think about what lies at the heart of what God wants for His people. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, the answer was obvious. All the Jews knew what the core of the Law was. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:5, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength," and Leviticus 16:18, "love your neighbor as yourself." These two commands form the heart of the law: love God and love others. But does the law help us to live this out? Think about the Ten Commandments. For the most part, the ten commandments tell us when we're not doing this. Don't steal, don't lie, don't murder. It helps to identify "unlove," but the law doesn't lead us to love. Laws protect us from hurting each other and help us to identify actions that are incompatible with love.

So God wants us to love each other, but the law doesn't really help us to love. Listen to what Paul says in Galatians 3:10-12:

The reason faith is so important is because anyone who tries to live by following the law will only experience the punishment that comes from breaking the law. The Scripture explains this when it says that everyone who can't live their lives completely in accordance with the law by obeying every last detail that it contains will be punished. The Scripture makes it really obvious that no one will ever be welcomed into God's kingdom through the law when it says that the one who has a good relationship with God does so by believing in Him. And the law has nothing to do with believing in God. So if anyone tries to base their life on the law, their life is about following the law, not believing in God.

Paul starts talking about this thing called faith and how it is different from law. He sets these two against each other. He says that all that the law does is show me how I fail to love. So how do I love? If the law doesn't lead me toward love, what does? Faith. God's kingdom isn't built by law. He says "No one will ever be welcomed into God's kingdom through the law" because the law doesn't lead us to love. The law tells us where not to go with each other, but it doesn't help us to know where to go. For that we need faith.

Yet, just as we keep God behind a fence because we find that safer, we do the same thing with each other. We'd rather keep others a little bit at arms distance. We don't want to hurt each other and we don't want to get hurt by another. And so fences work fine. But God doesn't call us not to hurt each other. He calls us to love each other. Do you see the distinction? Don't keep others behind a fence.

If you think about it, a lot of our mentality is rooted in

fences. We all want to avoid sin, right? That's often how we conceive of our spiritual growth: sinning less. But have you ever thought about why sin is wrong? What's wrong with sin? What is so sinful about sin? Did God just come up with an arbitrary list of things that were okay to do and things that weren't okay to do? This is what the world often charges God with. His ethics can sometimes seem to be haphazard and inconsistent. But I don't think that is the case. You see, the problem with sin is that it keeps us from loving.

Remember that the heart of God's instruction to His people is love. The heart of God's instruction is proper relationship. Why? Because God Himself is love. That is what defines Him. And we are created in His image. What God wants for His people is healthy relationship. Christians often talk about the importance of integrity. But integrity is something that I have. It's a quality that defines me. I can have integrity alone in a room. But I can't love someone when I'm alone in a room. I can have integrity but fail to love. What God wants for His people is love, and love can only be played out in relationship. Is it possible to follow God alone? No. How you can you try to love, make mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and grow in deeper love apart from other people? What God wants from His people is healthy relationships. What God wants from us is love.

So is it possible for us to be sinning less, but not loving? Is it possible for us to be rooting out the sinful patterns in our lives, but not loving other people? This is one of the ways that Christians are criticized by non-Christians. They say that we are more concerned with avoiding these fences than with loving other people. We're more concerned about minimizing how much we sin than maximizing how much we love.

Think about that fence on Middlefield Road. It's possible for me to never jump that fence but still be an irresponsible citizen of Mountain View. It's possible for me to never break a law and still be an irresponsible citizen of the United States. It's possible for me to follow the Law but fail to love. It's possible for me to avoid sin but to fall short of loving. God doesn't want us to not sin. He wants us to love. And in that sense, I think the world's criticism of us is worth listening to.

You see, our Christian culture is often one that seems to exist with a singular goal in mind: avoid sin. If you look at the way we relate to the world, if you look at the way we relate to each other, if you look at the way we think about how we want to grow spiritually, it often has to do with avoiding sin. I know that I thought this way for a long time as a Christian, and this is still something that I'm learning. Sometimes we can be so concerned about not sinning that we forget what the problem with sin is. If the problem with sin is that it prevents me from loving and I manage to avoid sin, but fail to love, then what have I done? Nothing. In I Corinthians, Paul says if you do this, you're nothing but a "clanging gong." You may have avoided the fence, but you haven't loved. That's why Paul is so concerned for the Galatians. They are bringing

back the Law and returning to living with fences, and this is going to prevent them from loving. When your goal is not to sin, it's really hard to love.

Some people did a study a number of years back on elementary school kids. They were trying to figure out how to design playground areas, and they experimented with having a playground area without fences. It was completely open to people passing by. What they found was that the kids seemed really unsure of themselves on a playground like this. They stuck to the middle and hung together. They never wandered far from the playground structure itself and were scared if they did. But then they added a fence around the playground, and the demeanor of the kids completely changed. Now they seemed confident and carefree. They wandered around the whole playground area much more freely. They came right up to the fence because they knew they were safe.

The truth is that we feel safer with fences. We feel safer when we're protected from each other. Deep down, I think we all want intimacy. We all crave to be known deeply. But it's also a scary thought. And most of us will settle for a nice safe fence rather than risk the rejection and disappointment that may come if we relate to people apart from fences. The truth is that oftentimes we are more interested in careful boundaries between us than in free relationships. Most of us have learned the hard way that loving freely means getting hurt. We've tried the whole intimacy route—with our parents or people we've dated or friends that have let us down. And it's a lot easier just to put up your fence. It's a lot easier to know how far you can go.

So we like fences. We like to protect ourselves from each other. I've seen this dynamic play out in my relationships, as well. I'm someone who doesn't like it when other people are angry or upset with me. A few years ago, when my wife and I went through some marriage counseling, I started to realize that I was more worried about displeasing my wife than I was interested in loving her. And I treat a lot of the people in my life this way. Often, I'm more afraid of people's anger than I am motivated to love them. And that fear makes it really difficult to love them. We can act this way around each other, too. Our culture has implicit categories of what we're supposed to do. In high school, you're supposed to work hard, get good grades, and get into a good college. In college you're supposed to be involved in a million student groups, get good grades, have high-powered summer internships, and land a good job. As a young professional you're supposed to work crazy hours, love your job, and sleep late in the morning. As a newlywed, you and your spouse are supposed to both be working at great jobs and saving money. When you have kids, you're supposed to go to PTA meetings and start playing soccer every weekend. But these expectations can turn into fences. And those fences can keep us from thinking about what God really wants from us. They can keep us focused on what other people expect of us, keep us playing this game, instead of asking how God is leading us individually. We don't want to make anyone upset

with us, so we never ask how God wants us to love. But we need to stop hiding behind our fences.

We also live behind fences when we create categories with each other. Later in chapter 4, Paul gets personal and talks about his relationship with the Galatians. He says that there were no fences between them. But the people who were trying to convince the Gentiles to get circumcised were professional fence builders. Read Gal 4:15-16:

So where have all those positive feelings toward me gone? I know for sure how much you cared about me. I mean, if it were possible, any one of you would have dug out your own eyes no matter how painful it was and given them to me just to ease my suffering. And now it seems like because I'm telling you the truth, you hate me. Don't you realize that those other guys are trying to convince you to see things their way, to set you against me so that you would be dependent on them and follow them so they feel better about themselves?

The Law was a fence that defined Jew and Gentile. And the Galatians were slipping into this fence mentality by thinking that they had to cross the fence and become Jewish to be a part of God's people. But Paul is encouraging them not to put each other behind fences. Good fences make bad neighbors. Christ has taken down the fence between Jew and Gentile. Don't put it back up again. Don't put others behind a fence.

What are some of the fences that we put up with each other? I think one of the easiest areas for us to create fences in are those individual decisions that different Christians make. They can create little camps, little clubs within our community. And if we focus on them in that way, they become fences that define us and separate us from each other. What are some examples? What about schooling options? Should Christians go to public school? Should they go to private school? Should they be home-schooled? Have you ever had a conversation with someone about school and all of a sudden you felt like you were on the other side of a fence from the person you're talking to? As if there isn't room for individual Christians to be led by God in different directions? All of a sudden somebody had built a fence.

That's just one example. If you have eyes to see, you'll notice that we have fences all around us. Fences between people who like hymns or praise songs. Fences between people who own a house or rent. Fences between people who choose to drink alcohol and those who choose not to. We're full of fences! Can you see them? Fences divide us because you see people on the other side. You see people only in comparison to you and not in light of your shared relationship with God. Fences make us treat each other

like bumper cars instead of carnival swings.

What's Paul's point? What my encouragement to us? What did I say about living behind fences? "To not to." The Law served a purpose for God's people. The law protected us. The law prepared us. And there are still times when we need protection and preparation. Childhood is an obvious one. Children need to be protected. And there might be different areas of our lives where we need protection. Sometimes if there is an area of sin that we struggle with, we need some help to protect us from that un-love. Sometimes we need accountability. Sometimes we need someone to check up on us. But these things are temporary measures as we grow into maturity.

The work of the gospel, what God wants for us in our relationship with Him and with each other, is to love each other apart from fences. As I look at my own life, I can see lots of areas where I have fences. I can see areas where I'm much more interested in being protected than loving others. In general, I'm aware of a pretty strong drive within me to protect myself at all costs. And so I'm drawn to fences. I'm drawn to living by some type of Law. I'm drawn to using distinctions between me and you to help keep me safe and separate from people that I may not know how to relate to.

But I see God changing me slowly, helping me to see chances where I might love someone even if it might violate that person's privacy. I find opportunities to love my wife instead of trying not to upset her. God is slowly giving me eyes to see places where I can take down the fence, and the courage to do so. He's slowly helping me to put down the rocks that I'm carrying and leave that hole in the fence. Robert Frost says that nature gradually tears down fences, but we keep rebuilding them. Well, if we'll let Him, God will gradually tear down our fences. That's the message of Galatians. That's the message of the gospel.

We are called to live apart from our fences. Next week we'll explore together the dangerous land of what lies beyond the fence. Good fences make bad neighbors. Don't live behind your fence. Look for ways to take down some of your fences between you and God and you and other people. Ask God to give you eyes to recognize that fence and the courage to take it down.

NOTES

¹ Robert Frost, "The Mending Wall"

² John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative*, 46-48