



A TALE OF TWO SONS

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Galatians 4:21-31
Eighth Message
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In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard writes:

How many people are radically and permanently repelled from the way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boring, lifeless, obsessive and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing up from a balanced vitality within God's loving rule. Spirituality wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of human misery and rebellion against God.¹

Those are true words! Many of us go to bed at night conscience-stricken and guilt-ridden. We are under the impression that pleasing God involves difficult and time-consuming activities, doing our best and piling up good works. God is pleased with us when we do well, we feel, and frowns on us when we fail. We imagine that he is very difficult to approach, because he never seems to be pleased with us.

As a result we live despondent and depressed Christian lives. We read the New Testament over and over and yet miss the whole point. To know what God is like we must look at Jesus. He is the purest expression of God. Paul says that Jesus is the "visible image of the invisible God." If you want to see what God is like, look to him as the Good Shepherd who relentlessly pursues the lost, following us into our darkness.

We have already seen that Paul uses the word grace 133 times out of the 153 occasions it is used in the New Testament. Jesus never used that word, however; he just embodied it. The apostle John says that he was "full of grace and truth." If you want to see what grace is like, take a good, hard look at Jesus. Paul's concern in Galatians is to show that grace is not an afterthought of God. No, God has always been gracious. He has always been seeking and saving the lost. He has always been the tender Shepherd who cares for the sheep. That is the way God is. It is his character.

Before Paul goes on to show how this grace is worked out in life he offers one final argument to prove that justification is by faith alone through grace. His argument is hard to understand, for a number of reasons. First, it assumes a knowledge of the Old Testament that few of us have. It talks about Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, Mount Sinai, and Jerusalem. Not only that, it reflects a rabbinical style of teaching that is both technical and allegorical.

Having said that, however, the passage is extremely relevant and up to date. Verse 21 says it is directed to folk "who want to be under law." There are many people like that today. In fact, the Christian church is filled with them. They may not be Judaizers, or even Jewish for that matter, but they think that their way to God depends on their own efforts. They imagine that their acceptance before him involves a rigid adherence to certain rules and regulations. To these, Paul says,

Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? (Galatians 4:21 NASB)

Paul keeps taking these legalists back to the very O.T. from which they argued. He meets them on their own ground, disproving their argument with their own evidence, exposing the inconsistency of their position. He says, in effect, "So you think that living by the law is the way to become justified before God. Then pay attention to the law! For the very law whose servant you want to be will judge you and sentence you."

The argument, though difficult to interpret, is easy to outline. It breaks down into three sections, the first historical, the second allegorical, and the third personal. Paul sets out the historical events, in verses 22-23; then draws from those historical events some important spiritual truths, in verses 24-27; and concludes by applying the allegory to life, in verses 28-31.

First, the historical.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. (4:22-23)

One of the Jews' proudest claims was that they were descended from Abraham, the father of their race. God had promised Abraham both a land and a seed: he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Because of this covenant with Abraham the Jews believed they were spiritually secure and eternally safe. Since they were physically related to the man with whom God had made his covenant promise, they assumed they were "in" with God.

But, even before Paul, both John the Baptist and Jesus himself took issue with the Jews on this matter. Calling on people to repent at the Jordan River, John said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these

stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt 3:9). Paul goes back to the O.T. to prove his point that true descent from Abraham is not physical but spiritual.

The story to which Paul refers is in Genesis 16. God promised Abraham that he would have more descendants than the stars in the sky. But a long time passed and still there were no children. God made a promise but there was nothing to show for it. Besides, Sarah was an old woman. If ever there was a situation to make a case for God helping those who help themselves, this was it. Abraham and Sarah became concerned, and Sarah told her husband to take her handmaid Hagar as his wife so that she could give him a child.

That sounds illegal or immoral to us, but we must remember that Abraham and Sarah lived before the law was given. Most wealthy people were polygamists in those days. The law codes of that era actually regulated the practice. It was a well-attested practice in the Ancient Near East that if a woman was barren, she could have a servant or surrogate bear and raise a child for her. The Code of Hammurabi gives specific guidelines for this practice. So there was nothing particularly illegal or immoral about what Sarah and Abraham did. It was their lack of faith that was the issue. They were trying to force God's hand, trying to help him do what he said he would do. In their efforts to produce the promised seed on their own they produced heartache for themselves and for God's people for years to come.

Abraham did what Sarah suggested. He took Hagar as his wife, and she conceived. Following the birth of Ishmael, Hagar began to despise Sarah, and she retaliated by mistreating Hagar and making a slave out of her. Hagar headed home, back to Egypt, but the angel of the Lord found her and said to her, "'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.' Moreover, the angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will greatly multiply your descendants that they shall be too many to count'" (Gen 16:9-10).

God looks out for discarded people! He cares about the distressed. He does not promise to Hagar what he promised to Abraham and Sarah's descendants. He will care for them; he will gather them in and shelter them under his wings. They can come in by faith the way everyone else comes, but salvation does not come through this line; it comes through the line of Isaac.

Thirteen years later, God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. Abraham replied that he wished Ishmael could "live in God's sight," while Sarah laughed at God's promise. But God was clear: they would have a son, his name would be Isaac, and God's covenant would be with him, not Ishmael.

Paul takes this same history that the Judaizers used to think they were spiritually secure and uses it to show that true descent from Abraham is not physical but spiritual. Abraham had two sons, but there were important differences between them. The first difference is that they had different mothers. Ishmael's mother, Hagar,

was a slave woman, Abraham's servant; Isaac's mother was a free woman, Abraham's wife. As a consequence, Ishmael was born into slavery and Isaac into freedom.

The second difference is that they were born in different ways. Ishmael's birth was, as Paul puts it, "according to the flesh." That is, it was a normal, natural human birth. Isaac's birth, however, was supernatural. Sarah was past menopause; it was impossible for her to have children. Abraham was 100 years old at this time, and yet the child was born. This wasn't a virgin birth, but it was a miraculous one.

From these differences between Abraham's sons, Ishmael was born a slave, according to the flesh, while Isaac was born free, according to promise, Paul will now develop an allegory. He will show that these two sons represent two different means of salvation, one gained by human effort, through keeping the law, the other gained supernaturally, through the grace of God.

He develops the allegory in verses 24-27.

This is allegorically speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband." (4:24-27)

We tend to regard allegories as fiction, but in this case Paul takes historical events and makes an allegory from them. These are real people, and these events really happened, but they can be interpreted in another way. They are historical events, and they also stand for a profound spiritual truth.

These two women represent two covenants, the Old and the New. John Stott writes,

A covenant is a solemn agreement between God and men...God established the old covenant through Moses and the new covenant through Christ...The old covenant was based on law; but the new covenant... is based on promises. In the law God laid the responsibility on men and said "thou shalt..., thou shalt not..."; but in the promise God keeps the responsibility Himself and says, "I will..., I will..."²

Hagar represents the old covenant, which naturally gives birth to slavery. Sarah represents the new covenant, which supernaturally gives birth to freedom. These women represent not only two covenants, but two Jerusalems as well. The city of Jerusalem from which these Judaizers had come was the origin of legalism. According to Paul, Hagar stands for this earthly city of Jerusalem and the legalism and bondage it represents. But Sarah is different. She represents a heavenly Jerusalem, "Jerusalem from above." This is an invisible

Jerusalem composed of God's people, not necessarily confined to people here on earth, but all who gather around our Lord Jesus. The Book of Hebrews uses Zion and Jerusalem in this way. It is the assembly of the first-born. We are a part of that spiritual Jerusalem. Jerusalem above is our mother, just as Sarah was Isaac's mother.

For it is written, "Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband." (4:27)

This is taken from Isaiah 54, which comes right after that well-known text which foretells the Messiah's death. In this chapter, God's people are gathered around a New Jerusalem. In its context, the prophet is addressing the exiles in the Babylonian captivity, concerning their return to Zion. But Paul uses it here to refer to the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, the assembly of the first-born, all of us who are gathered around the Lord Jesus Christ as a result of his sacrifice. The apostle says that there are more children gathered around Zion, the spiritual Zion, than ever were gathered around the old literal Zion.

In the exile, Israel had lost large numbers of her population. Isaiah promised that when they returned, Zion would have more children than she ever had before. According to Paul, this means that when we gather around the Lord Jesus, there will be more people gathered in the spiritual Jerusalem than ever gathered around the physical Jerusalem. Sarah was barren and gave birth to Isaac; Israel was barren and gave birth to Jesus, the shoot of Jesse. Then Jesus, the seed of Abraham, who had no offspring, gave birth to a multitude of Christians.

John Stott summarizes the allegory in this way, "Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, born of two mothers, Hagar and Sarah, who represent two covenants and two Jerusalems. Hagar the slave stands for the old covenant, and her son Ishmael symbolizes the church of the earthly Jerusalem. Sarah the free woman stands for the new covenant, and her son Isaac symbolizes the church of the heavenly Jerusalem."³ To those who are deriving their security through being physical descendants of Abraham, Paul says it isn't enough to claim that Abraham is our father. The real question is, Who is your mother?

Now Paul applies the allegory.

And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman." So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman. (4:28-31)

Paul's conclusion is that we Christians are like Isaac, not Ishmael. Our descent is spiritual, not physical. We are not sons of Abraham naturally, but supernaturally. We are in that spiritual line because we have exercised faith in that promised seed. So we are descendants of Isaac. As a result, we can expect to be treated as Isaac was treated. The treatment that Isaac received from his half brother Ishmael is the treatment that Isaac's descendants will get from Ishmael's descendants. Genesis 21 records that Isaac was persecuted. At the ceremony at which Isaac was weaned, probably when he was three years old, Ishmael, a teenager by then, made fun of him. We don't know what he did or said. His behavior is described in Genesis with but one Hebrew word which can be translated "laughed," or "mocked." But is clear from the passage that Isaac was the recipient of Ishmael's scorn.

We can expect the same. It was the religious establishment who angrily resisted, rejected and ridiculed our Lord. It has been so down through the centuries. The great Protestant reformers paid dearly from the established church for proclaiming freedom in Christ. Whenever you live in freedom you are going to ruffle somebody's feathers. Ishmaels will always mock Isaacs.

Paul's second conclusion is this: Kick Ishmael out! (verse 30). "But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman.'" Although Isaac had to endure the scorn of Ishmael, it was Isaac who became the heir of his father, Abraham, and received the inheritance. At one point Abraham wanted Ishmael to be the heir. He cried out to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" But God told him, "No, I will establish my covenant with Isaac." Sarah asked Abraham to cast out the slave and her son, and God told Abraham to do what she had said.

So Paul quotes that verse. But here he is not talking about people, but about what Ishmael represents, which is the principle of legalism. The two cannot be mixed. We have to get rid of law. Law works to drive us to Christ, but it can do nothing more for us. It can't save us. It can't sanctify us. It can't guarantee our salvation. It can't give us power in our ministry. It is a good thing, a pure instrument, but it can't change us or empower us. So, don't hang around with Ishmael. He will make you miserable. He will work you to death because he is a cruel taskmaster.

In the West, we have an optimistic view of self-effort. We think there is nothing we cannot do if we work hard. But when we live like that, then it is all about us, and as a result we live miserable lives. We never feel spiritual enough. We pray, we memorize Scripture, we get up early in the morning to meet with God. There is nothing wrong with any of these things, but they do not make God any happier with us. Those of us who believe God are already approved. He is already our friend; we don't have to prove anything. He loves us

because we are in his Son.

Ishmael will make you a phony, because if your acceptance by God is based on performance, you always have to perform, you are always on stage. The tragedy is that there are some places in life, our homes, for instance, where we cannot remain on stage. That's why our children sometimes wonder if what we have is authentic. We talk and act one way in public, but at home it's an entirely different matter. Sometimes we are rightly accused of hypocrisy, because we don't understand grace. It's all right to fail, to struggle, to have a habit that presently is unconquered. Admit it. You don't have to cover it up. God loves you anyway. Of course, he does want to do something about it, but he loves you unconditionally.

If you keep company with Ishmael, you will be harsh with others. Ungraced people are always ungracious and unforgiving. They can't tolerate sin in themselves, and they can't tolerate it in anyone else. It makes for miserable marriages and miserable parents, because we are always laying the law on one another.

I will close with these insightful words from John Stott:

The religion of Ishmael is a religion of *nature*, of what *man* can do by himself without any special intervention of God. But the religion of Isaac is a religion of *grace*, of what God has done and does...Christianity is not natural religion but supernatural. The Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves that they are righteous...[They] are in bondage, because that is what self-reliance always leads to; the Isaacs enjoy freedom, because it is through faith in Christ that men are set free.⁴

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

2. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 124.

3. Stott, *Galatians*, 126.

4. Stott, *Galatians*, 129-129.

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