

Getting the Order Right
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 1, 2019- AM Sermon
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Galatians 2:11-21

All children do it. *'Mom, Mom, look at me! 'Look at me Uncle Bob! See what I made!'* *'Dad, Dad! Look at what I can do!'* You go with your 4-year-old niece to the beach. You're sitting in your chair reading your book and your niece is building sand castles, the kind of sand castles 4 year olds build. And every time she's done she says *'Aunt Susie! Look at me! Look at what I made!'* Being a dutiful aunt who genuinely loves your niece, you say, *"Wow! That is a great sand castle!"* Over the course of the afternoon, the look-at-me-wow exchange repeats roughly 7000 times. This is a thing. All children do this.

Why do they do it? Obviously they do it to get your attention and your affirmation. No great mystery there. But why is attention so important? Why do they want affirmation? Children are looking for affirmation and attention because they want to know that they matter in this world. Children look for signs of affirmation from adults because they want their existence to count, and when an adult says 'Wow!' or 'That's wonderful!' they feel like they count. How deep is this need? So deep that if children don't get positive affirmation, they will look for negative attention. Ask any kindergarten teacher. They'll tell you. A child will misbehave for attention, and even if that attention gets them a tongue lashing, at least someone noticed them. At least they weren't invisible.

It's not just children of course. We all need this. We all want to be noticed. We all want to be loved. We all want affirmation and acceptance. That's what this passage is about, it's about what it takes to have significance. It's about how we find affirmation and acceptance in this world. Maybe that surprises you. "Peter, I thought we just read a passage about Paul getting angry at Peter for his inconsistent dinner habits. On Monday, Peter eats with Gentiles and seems to have no qualms about having a little pork. On Tuesday, when the strict Jewish Christians from Jerusalem show up, all of a sudden Peter is eating kosher and acting as if his Gentile friends are unclean. Paul accuses him of hypocrisy. I didn't hear anything in this passage about children looking for attention, or adults trying to find significance." Well, I can understand why we might think that, but the issue of acceptance and approval is absolutely at the center of this passage. In fact, this passage is about the most important attention and affirmation we can get as human beings. This is not the affirmation of Aunt Susie at the beach saying "Wow, Great sandcastle!" This is the affirmation of our heavenly Father. This passage is about what it takes for our heavenly Father to look at our lives and say, *"Wow! Well done! You are my Beloved. In you I am well-pleased!"* And that's real significance. It's nice if Aunt Susie gives you kudos for your sandcastle, but when you are beloved by the Father you have found real acceptance. Then you've found your life's anchor.

Our passage doesn't use the words affirmation and acceptance; Paul's word is justification. He uses the word three times in verse 16 and once in verse 21, but it all means the same thing: when you are justified, you are beloved by God, you are accepted by God, and you stand in the center of his purposes. At the heart of this passage is a dispute about what it takes to be justified, what it takes to be accepted by the Father. The eating with Gentiles is just a surface issue. The real issue is, how do you get the Father's acceptance and approval? That's why Paul is so worked up here. That's why he seems to be so angry at Peter. Because the heart of the gospel is at stake. In this passage, there are two different views about what it takes to be justified by God. One of them is the gospel and one of them is not. So what are these two conflicting views about how to become acceptable to God, and how can we understand the differences between them? They're different because they have a different spiritual order.

First there is the view held by what Paul calls the circumcision group. The circumcision group is a group of Christians from Jerusalem. They believe that all the old Jewish laws are binding for Christians. They believe that if you want to be accepted by God, you have to obey his laws. So the proper order of salvation is faith-obedience-acceptance. First you have faith that Jesus is the Messiah, then you keep all the old testament laws—all the feasts and all the instructions, and then the Father sees your obedience and he says, "Wow! Well done!!" You commit to the path, you prove your commitment, you get the Father's approval. Faith—obedience-acceptance.

Paul has a different order. That order is laid out most clearly in verse 16. "*We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*" So, for Paul justification (acceptance) comes before the law, before obedience. Paul's order is Faith, acceptance and then obedience.

First you have faith. You put your trust in Jesus, and then as a free gift, because of his sacrifice, you are declared righteous. You are accepted. And then, out of the joy of your acceptance, you live for God. You obey. The order is: faith, acceptance, obedience. The circumcision order is faith, then obedience, then acceptance. The Order of the gospel as Paul proclaims it is faith, then acceptance, then obedience.

Maybe this sounds like boring, abstract theology. I assure you it is not. These are two completely different ways of living. If you learn to let the gospel order rule your life instead of the circumcision order, everything will change for you. It will be liberating! Here's the truth: we all live by one of these two orders. Most of the great religions of the world follow the circumcision order. Most religions are faith, obedience, acceptance. You accept that religion—you have faith that it is the true way of life. Then you show your obedience: you follow the rules and the practices of the religion. And then, only after you've proved your commitment are you accepted.

Not only that, for most of us the faith-obedience-acceptance order is our default way of seeking approval. Think of the example I used at the beginning of the sermon. When a child builds a sandcastle and says "Look what I made!" What

order is she adopting? Faith. She has faith that the person she's talking to will be able to make her feel accepted. Obedience. She does something to prove her worth. She makes the castle. Acceptance. Aunt Susie says, "Wow! You're great!" That four-year-old is already out there trying to prove herself according to the faith, obedience, acceptance scheme. This is also the dominant order in our society today. Most people will call our society a meritocracy. That's a way of saying in order to make it in our society, in order to prove that you belong, in order to prove your worth, you have to prove your merit. You are accepted into a good college by proving your merit. You are hired to a good job by proving your merit. You rise up through the company ranks by proving your merit. Faith, obedience, acceptance. It's everywhere in our society.

Sometimes that's appropriate. If you are putting together a baseball team and you're choosing a shortstop you don't just give the job to anyone, you give it to someone who can field groundballs and make a hard throw to first base. If you are running an engineering program at a college, you don't give out degrees to anyone who asks. Students have to prove that they can do the work.

Sometimes faith, obedience, acceptance needs to be the order of things. But if faith, obedience, acceptance is the order that grounds your life, if you try to anchor your heart and soul on faith, obedience, acceptance, you will be miserable.

Your relationship with God will be anxious. You will never be sure of your status with Him. *"I know I do a lot of things for God, but I also know I've done foolish things and I know I can be really self-centered. Is my obedience enough to earn his acceptance? Is my obedience enough for him to say, 'Wow! Well done?' I don't even like myself sometimes, why would he accept me?"* And it's not just God, if you anchor your life in faith, obedience, acceptance your relationship with others will be anxious too. Everywhere you go you will feel like you have to prove yourself, prove that you are smart enough, prove that you're pretty enough, prove that you're talented enough to belong. If faith, obedience, acceptance is your center, you will be insecure, you will be exhausted. Paul rejects the order of the circumcision group. *"You are not acting in line with the truth of the gospel,"* he says. You have the order wrong. *"A person is not justified by the works of the law."* Obedience does not come before acceptance! The order is faith, acceptance, obedience. We put our faith in Jesus, we are accepted in him, and out of the joy of that acceptance, by the power of the Spirit, we joyfully obey. The order of the gospel, the order of our life, is faith acceptance obedience.

Here's the picture Paul has in mind. When we give our lives to Jesus, he does two things. First, he pays for our sins on the cross. Our sins and failures are washed away and we are declared righteous. But Jesus does more than that. By the Holy Spirit, he plants himself in our hearts, and he begins to change us from the inside out. The old you, the anxious you, the you who is absolutely exhausted from trying to prove yourself every day, that you is gradually getting killed off. In its place, Jesus has planted a new self. That new self is anchored in God's grace and his acceptance and his love. That new self is taking over. You are becoming a new creation. The Spirit is changing you from one degree of glory to the next. What is

this like? It's like a reverse Zombie movie. I'm sorry for the homely analogy, but it's the best I could come up with. In a zombie movie, if a zombie bites you, you are infected. The zombie life gradually takes you over and, little by little, you become a creature of death. When God puts his Holy Spirit in you, when you are 'bitten' by his grace, the opposite happens. You start to become a creature of life! Little by little your sinful self-dies and you become this radiant creature. You are justified! You are a new creation! That's why Paul says those strange things about his new life. It is no longer I who live! My sinful self is getting killed off. "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me!" Deep down, I'm becoming a new person. I go through the world and I love people and care for people, not because I'm anxiously trying to prove my worth (Look at me! Look what I made!); I love people and show compassion because that's who I am.

Faith, acceptance, and then obedience. When you get the order right, your life is completely different. How can I explain this? Maybe an analogy will help. I live in Indian Village on the southeast side of Grand Rapids. It's a nice little neighborhood, bounded by Burton, Breton and Plymouth. When I want to drive out toward Lowes on 28th street or any other place out there by Woodland mall the best way for me to get out of the neighborhood is to drive down Onekama. Onekama is a beautiful road full of nice homes. The speed limit on Onekama is 25. When I first lived in the neighborhood and started driving out Onekama on an errand, I chafed at that speed limit. I wanted to get my stuff done and 25 is so slow. But I kept it at 30 because I didn't want to get a ticket. I didn't want people to see the minister of LaGrave sitting in his car, strobes flashing behind him, and a policeman standing by his window.

More recently new people have moved onto Onekama. Young families with children. At least two of these families with children are LaGrave families. I know these families. The children come up for Children's sermons. They are beloved members of my family. Now when I drive down Onekama I drive more slowly and more carefully than ever before, and I don't do it reluctantly. I'm not driving slowly because I'm worried about getting a ticket. I'm driving slowly because I'm thinking about those kids. I don't want to hit them, and more than that I really want their neighborhood to be a happy place where they feel safe and noticed and loved. Do you see the difference? The first way my obedience was a way of saving face and maintaining social acceptance. In the second way, I still practice the obedience but the obedience comes out of the love and relationship I already have in my heart. *Which of those two motivations makes for a better trip down Onekama?* That's the change of Spirit that Paul wants us to experience for the journey of our whole life! You are not justified by the obedience to the law. This is not about proving yourself every day. You are accepted! You are beloved! It is no longer you who live, but Christ lives in you. You are a new creation. His Spirit is changing your heart. Have faith in that truth. Let it fill you up. Let it set you free.

