

“The Law vs The Promise” Part 2

Christian Liberty

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Galatians 3:23-29

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Mark: Well, good morning, men.

Men: Good morning.

Mark: It’s good to be with you again. Well let’s turn to the passage we’ll be considering. We’re just going to grab that last paragraph of chapter three, continuing on from the previous section there for a few paragraphs.

And let’s pray together and we’ll dive in. Father, thank You for life and breath. These are gifts from You to be used to give You great glory. And so Father, now open Your word. The entrance of Your word gives light. And so we pray for light—clear minds, open hearts, to receive it as from You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Men: Amen.

Mark: Galatians chapter three. And let me just read the paragraph we’re going to consider, chapter 3, verses 23 to the end of the chapter there. Galatians 3, verses 23 to the end of the chapter. And I’m reading from the ESV.

“Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring—heirs according to promise.”

So here’s the thirty thousand foot view, and it’s right here in the outline before you. I just want to kind of parse out the flow of the argument there, to just kind of follow along with it, and then just pull on two strings, two strands. It’s immensely complex, as I’m sure you can see. So you can’t really explain everything or break everything down, of course. So let’s just follow the general flow of the argument. And I just want to pull out two strands to reflect on a little bit.

It’s continuing this longer argument where Paul is contrasting the purpose of the law and God’s promise to Abraham—Moses and Abraham, right? The Galatian Judaizers were saying, “We still need Moses. Even in light of the promise that has been fulfilled in Christ, we still need some of Moses. We still need circumcision. We need some of these other aspects of the law.”

And Paul is just taking aim at that as a fundamental denial of the gospel, saying no. We have the promise and it has been fulfilled in Christ. And by faith we experience it.

And he seeks to make all of these different types of arguments, appealing to their personal experience. Were you justified by works or by faith? He appeals to history. He explains their founding father Abraham to them. Abraham was justified by faith, not by circumcision. The promise came first before circumcision.

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He makes these different arguments. And he’s kind of continuing in that vein here, to show that the promise that was given to Abraham is fulfilled completely in Christ. The answer is greater, more foundational than the purpose and use of the law. And he picks up right there in verse 23. Let’s just break this paragraph down into basically two parts—*the work and the law* and *the blessings of the promise*, which basically can be summed up as our union in Christ.

He talks about the law in an explicitly negative way here. Look. He says, “Before faith came we were held captive under the law”—“imprisoned” in verse 23 as well.

The Judaizers were arguing that the law actually brought freedom. And Paul has to counter that and say no. Actually, it locked us up. It was an imprisoning thing, a restrictive thing.

And you know, the greatest proof of that is when you think about Moses on Sinai getting all this legislation from God Himself and telling Israel what it means to be truly Israel, to be a light to the nations, to be God’s people. And then the reality of that is that every single one of the Israelites failed to be a true Israelite. Israel was whittled down from this whole nation of people to one faithful Israelite. That’s prison! They couldn’t even be the nation God called them to be.

And that’s what the law did. The law showed them incapable of being what God calls and demands that His people be. It whittled down all the way to One who was faithful.

So Christ received all of the blessings of fulfilling the law. But even then the perfect Israelite takes the curse. So that’s how captivating, that’s how imprisoning the law is, that only one Israelite could fulfill it and carry it out.

And also they went into captivity in Babylonia because they broke the law.

Participant: Right.

Mark: So they couldn’t even stay in the place that God had given to them. So the law was obviously, when you just trace the history, an imprisoning thing, not this freeing thing that the Judaizers wanted to make it.

So they were held captive under the law. They were imprisoned. And then there’s this other image here. Paul says that the law was our guardian. Now that sounds nice, as though some outpost guy was standing there protecting. But it’s actually a negative thing.

If you look at first century pictures of this person, this pedagogue or what is called here a guardian, he was first of all normally a slave who was entrusted with the ability to make sure that the kids were educated. Now that sounds nice and helpful, until you realize that some of the ancient pictures of the people who occupied this position had rods, disciplinary things. So they were entrusted with doing whatever it took to get that kid educated, including physical punishment. It sounds kind of restrictive if you’re a six- to a sixteen-year-old kid, right? You don’t like the guardian, because his purpose is to carry out the wishes of the father.

And so the law was imprisoning as a guardian. It was imprisoning Israel as well. It was a taskmaster to which Israel had to submit unwillingly. So Paul is arguing, and he raises the guardian factor again in verse 24. So in 23-25 he’s basically articulating the negative nature of the law.

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Now this doesn't overturn the reality that the law itself is good, as Paul says elsewhere, if it is used lawfully, in its right place. It's bad when you use it as an instrument of liberation and giving life, because it can't do that. Paul said that in the previous paragraph. If a law that could give life existed, then it would have been given. But it can't do that. It actually kills, right?

Again, it's like the speed limit signs you see when you're in a rush. It kills your spirit. It provokes you. It makes you get on the lookout for police if you're going over the speed limit, right? That's not a life giving teacher! It's restrictive, imprisoning, negative.

It doesn't make the law bad. It just reveals what we are. The law itself is good. A speed limit can be life saving.

So law itself is not bad. But it had these bad and negative consequences. It was necessarily formative and constructive because this was all the pretext and context into which Christ came and fulfilled in the fullness of time. Paul will say this in chapter four. But this is just to point out that there's this negative aspect, counter to what the Judaizers were saying.

But then he articulates the blessings of the promise. So he lays out the kind of preparatory work of the law and its negative effect, and then begins to tell what that gives way to in verses 26-29.

And if there is one phrase in all of Paul that sums up what the Christian's chief blessing of salvation is, or chief benefit to use the term that many theologians use, the primary or principle or central benefit of salvation, it is this little phrase that occurs all over Paul—*in Christ*.

Participant: Amen.

Mark: Which is union with Christ or incorporation into Christ. We're a super-hyper individualistic country. So we don't tend to think as deeply in these kinds of incorporated relational categories.

You know, if you go to traditional cultures, and you go to many places in Africa, the generation that is now alive sees itself inextricably connected to its ancestors. It's like they're living out the blessings and cursing of those that came before them. And they believe that their children and their children's children will live a life that is inextricably connected to their lives now. There's just this kind of incorporation into one another.

And missionaries note that if you went to a tribe and the chief came to Christ, then the whole tribe would follow on, because they saw their identity as caught up in their leader. So the blessings of the leader became the blessings of the people. The curses of the leader became the curses of the people. They had this sense of union in their head.

Maybe the closest thing we have is sports.

Participant: Amen to that.

Mark: You watch a game. You go to a game. If the Pirates win, we are yelling and screaming as winners, right? Even though not a single one of us was on the field doing anything tangible to help, right? (*Laughter.*) Why is it that we can be hundreds of miles away and jumping up and down at a win of our team when we had absolutely nothing to do with it other than watching with our eyes? Why do we feel like we won when our team has the higher score?

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sonship. I mean, we know this in the social and civil sphere. If you are disconnected at the most foundational level from your father, the effects ripple throughout the rest of your life, because it’s so central to who a person is.

Well, more central than just the human social realm is this theological realm of being a son of God. It gives you a firm identity at the heart of reality. Yes, sir?

Participant: And an inheritance.

Mark: Yes. That’s what we’re getting to.

Participant: I didn’t mean to jump ahead of you.

Mark: Oh no! That’s good. It keeps us all connected. I think Paul’s mind was so compressed. He could see all these things. (*Laughter.*) Yes, sir?

Participant: If we could just look back for a second, I was looking at 23, 24 and 25. And the imagery of being taken captive, imprisoned, guardian, taskmaster—

Mark: Yes.

Participant: All together, he’s tapping back into Egypt imagery.

Mark: Oh yes.

Participant: And then when he says, “until Christ came,” now he’s back into Mosaic imagery.

Mark: Oh yes.

Participant: So they would have inherently gotten something that we might have missed just from reading it casually.

Mark: Yes. That’s good, that’s very good. Slaves in Egypt, yes, that’s in the background there. You especially see it in Romans 6-8—enslaved to sin, freed. You just see Egypt right in the background. That’s so essential. It’s just like our July fourth is so political. Well, theirs was political, theological, everything. Their liberation from Egypt defined them as a people. So that’s good. That’s a good image to point out.

“*You are all sons of God.*” So we’re not orphans. Paul will say so beautifully in the next chapter that we cry out, “Abba, Father!” from the heart because the Spirit has brought us into sonship. We’ve been adopted into the family of God.

We think of adoption as when you just have a little baby and signing all these papers and everything. Adoption in the Greco-Roman culture was so much different. You could be an adult and a slave could be adopted. And that meant that you got all this inheritance and blessing. You had social standing. You got all this new identity.

But there’s sonship, which is a blessing of our union with Christ. But he also talks about being baptized in verse 27, and having put on Christ. So Paul uses all these things interchangeably—being in Christ, being baptized, putting on Christ.

Baptism, of course, is the initiation rite into the new community. If you were a pagan, you would go into the water, or you would get the water poured on you. You would come up in newness of life—Romans 6. And you’re part of the new body. That’s why some traditions give you a new name when you get baptized. It’s a new identity. You’re into a new community. You’re this new person. You’re part of a new order, right? And Paul is saying that that’s what happens when you’re in Christ, as seen in the initiation rite of baptism. We won’t get into an argument about the meaning of baptism and its effects and all that, but just to see that it’s tied together with union with Christ, with conversion.

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And he uses this beautiful image of that when you’re baptized, you put on Christ. In the first century, when you got baptized, you’d be naked and go in the water and you would come out, and they would put a robe on you. So you put on Christ, a new identity. You take on His character. You are a son of God. You are a joint heir with Him.

And then the language of *heir*, of inheritance. That’s another blessing that comes up in 29. You are heirs, which is to say that you’re not slaves.

Paul says some of these ideas in seed form. And then he’ll go on a rabbit trail a little later and open it all up. So he’s going to go on. Chapter four is basically an expansion of what it means to be an heir and not a slave, what it means to be a child of the promise and not a child of the bondwoman. He’s going to open some of that up. So as an heir you’re getting all the blessings.

And this comes up with Paul again in Ephesians, where in chapter 1 he talks about an inheritance that is given to us, and that we are made heirs. We are “*seated in the heavenly places in Christ.*” That’s not just flowery language. That’s a real new order that we have not yet seen the full manifestation of, but is real nevertheless. Just as much as the oak tree is in the little oak is there, but not yet manifest, we have this status of sonship, this rich inheritance that is given to us in Christ because His blessings become our blessings.

So the law was preparatory for that till Christ came, till faith came. And then all of these blessings became ours.

It’s almost impossible in a multi-ethnic nation, where we’re a melting pot and all of these European countries and all these various countries have just come together. It’s kind of hard to get a sense of the shock value of saying that a Gentile gets the same blessing as the Jew, a son of Abraham. Yes?

Participant: As you mentioned, it was the same shock value when Jesus told His disciples, “You are My friends, if you do as I command.”

Mark: Yes.

Participant: “You are no longer servants, for a servant doesn’t know the Father’s business.”

Mark: Right.

Participant: “You are My friends.” And I think that even then the disciples, who were all Jews, had to have some time to wrap their heads around this, as do we.

Mark: Yes. Oh yes. Absolutely. Remember that Peter had to have a nightmare about pork and shrimp. (*Laughter.*) And God had to shock his sensibilities. Can you imagine him smelling that pork and seeing it? And God says, “Eat!” This is before he would even go to Cornelius. So yes, absolutely there are scruples. Yes?

Participant: But there were also examples in Jesus’ own life—the Syrophenician woman, the woman at the well—

Mark: That’s true, yes.

Participant: The unclean people who came to Jesus. So the apostles would have seen them as “Oh, these are people outside of Israel” because of condition or heritage or whatever. And Jesus interacted with them and touched them and loved them. So His mission and His message were the same, because—

Mark: Oh yes, absolutely. Okay. Yes?

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Participant: A fellow that does real good about kind of blowing your mind on this stuff is Philip Yancey.

Mark: Oh yes.

Participant: He wrote the book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* And he deals with a number of what for evangelicals are outcast groups. And it’s hard to read. It was hard for me to read.

Mark: Oh yes.

Participant: It was too unsettling.

Mark: Grace is unsettling.

Participant: It is very unsettling because somehow, deep down inside, I merit it in some fashion.

Yes. That’s good.

Participant: Philip Yancey.

Mark: *What’s So Amazing About Grace.* Very good.

So that’s just a little bit of the argument from this negative preparatory work of the law to this expression of the blessings of the promise. And he uses a lot of different languages—faith, in Christ language, heir sonship. He just puts it all in there to say this and then so much more that he leaves unspoken.

Let’s pull on two strands. I want to pull on this general psychology of pinning performance. Let’s call law *performance*, because that’s an aspect of it—doing this and being included. That’s performance. It’s the psychology behind performance versus promise, living by performance versus living by the promise.

If our salvation and our sanctification, which means our growth in grace, if that came by promise. In other words, God said it, and it’s unconditional in terms of its reality. People don’t believe and forfeit, but that doesn’t undo the central reality of the promise. God is going to get what God wants, as God says. But if our salvation, our sanctification came by promise, then we must be ever vigilant against the ever present lie that it somehow can come now by performance.

Look, the Galatians had gospel amnesia. How soon they were removed! They believed the promise. This group comes in and says, “No. You must also add a little bit of this performance to it, right?” Get circumcised. Eat this way. And other parts of the law they were seeking to retrieve. They fell off track. If they had gospel amnesia, we can too! It’s an ever present problem, to forget that our status, standing, position, is ours by faith.

Participant: Amen.

Mark: Not work. It’s like, you know, I wake up in the morning. And it’s within moments that I’m harassed by the demands of the day. And I start feeling the stress of what I think I need to do versus what I can possibly get done. The law will harass us. I’m sure some of you guys feel harassed by the demands of your relationships—your marriages, with your children, in your work places—the demands, the sense of I need to measure up in order to be somebody, in order to be justified and feel right. That puts a lot of pressure on us.

And it comes in so many different ways. Our hearts are programmed to seek a sense of self-justification in what we do and how we live. And it’s exhausting!

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I have seen so many men my age, now in their forties, who just fall apart from exhaustion. That youthful energy fades. You can't do it, and that sense of not being able to meet up catches up with you.

And into that kind of dynamic it needs to be thundered that you are justified by faith, not by performance. Your status as a son is yours by promise, not by performance.

Now this is why I love that Luther quote. I'm sure that many of you know that he says this is why we have to beat the gospel into ourselves every day. We forget. It's not part of our hard wiring.

And so when we are restless and exhausted, in pursuit of a status and standing by performance, you need to have the gospel ring out fresh in your ears.

Participant: Amen.

Mark: And you know, people start to argue over this. Does grace cause license? Does preaching the gospel like this make fat, lazy, inattentive Christians? And I say no!

Participant: Amen.

Mark: It's actually the engine, the energy. Grace is at the root and foundation. God's promise is what structures everything else.

And so I say that when we feel chained by the law, when we feel enslaved, you are not going to get out of that sense, you're not going to in any way “improve” yourself if you just simply try to fight your way out of the chains. There needs to be a recognition. I like what one theologian said. “When I felt myself loved in my chains, it was that which triggered the very sense of freedom that I needed.”

So we have got to constantly remind ourselves. This is why we need the Lord's table, to be reminded that it is His work and not ours, and that it is ours by promise and not by our performance, and why we constantly need to be called to rest in this reality.

We can't be faithful, obedient, righteous unless we are understanding and we have first received Christ's own righteousness by faith, until we see our standing and position is ours by promise and faith. Then we don't labor for rest. We labor from rest at that point. Our status precedes our actions. So we have got to get this. This is *sola fide*, right? This is faith alone. The *sola* is so important. It's Jesus plus nothing equals everything. It's not Jesus plus the law equals everything. It's Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

We get gospel amnesia, men. We forget. I woke up this morning and just felt the stress of the day, thinking, “Oh, okay. I've got to do this. How will I do that? Now wait, wait! Lord, You made me Your child by promise, not by performance. Okay, I'm still going to be Your child whether this thing is a failure or not.”

Participant: Tell your boss that. (*Laughter.*) I mean, isn't that how it is? It's two worlds. You've got to live up to a certain standard in order to make a living and in order to get ahead in some ways, whatever we think that means. And on the other hand I have to live in that reminder of being a child of God. And yet I know there is some transition there. I know there's some freedom there. But unless we don't totally buy into the world's system and just get by somehow, some way, without having to make a lot of money—I mean, it's hard. How do you raise kids and put them into college without working hard?

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Mark: You know, grace is not opposed to effort. It’s opposed to earning. Grace doesn’t make you lazy. It doesn’t make you opposed to effort and working hard. It’s opposed to earning. Working hard is not going to change your status as a son of God.

Participant: That’s right.

Mark: So absolutely work hard! Actually, I get the freedom to work hard because I know that I don’t need to work hard to get this cosmic standing as a son of God.

Participant: There you go. Yes.

Second Participant: And I was just thinking about being in Christ. So when I go to work I’m in Christ. And where I work is my ministry. So thinking about having the mindset that whatever I do, I’m working for the Lord. So I’m working hard. I’m working for the Lord and trying to keep the proper mindset. And also I’m just thinking how we need to feed on the word of God. And also with this gospel we need to feed ourselves with, we need to share with others. And then we’re empowered by the Holy Spirit. You know, that’s the battle. If I’m working for myself, where I go there and I can do this, that’s not the right mindset. But trying to keep the proper mindset, which is God’s mindset, is the thing we need to do, asking the Lord to help us to do that.

Mark: Sure, sure.

Participant: It also goes back to what was mentioned about *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*”, because it’s not just what I’m doing, but it’s grace that empowers me not to do my job, but to do it better than expected, because I’m now in Christ.

Mark: Right. Yes. Absolutely. I mean, you know, think about the difference. I’m sure that many of you are parents. Think about the difference of a child who feels the tyranny of a parent who is going to crash down on them and every little mistake they make, and the child who feels affirmed and loved and fundamentally embraced, so he or she can labor and work and fail and not feel like his or her status as a child is at stake.

Participant: That’s right.

Mark: Psychologists have shown that the child who feels foundationally loved works with freedom. The one who feels the tyranny of his parents, whose displeasure is always going to come down on him, is going to have an emotional breakdown at some point.

Participant: It’s the essence of flowers. When you plant them, water them, edify them, take care of them, they blossom and they bring joy to you. If you don’t take care of them and lift them up, they’re going to die, just like that child who feels imprisoned. They’re going to die.

Mark: Yes, absolutely. Yes?

Participant: You know, fear can be paralyzing too. So if you run around in this world and constantly think, ‘I have to succeed, I have to succeed, I have to succeed’, basically you just sometimes sit there and don’t do anything. So if you have that freedom, then you can just kind of take a breath and know that you have love and things are going to be okay. You might not understand all of what’s going on. But you can just keep on going. And then sometimes your inspiration will come to you.

Mark: Yes. The basic psychology here, I think, is the basic dynamic of history here laid out by Paul. The law can’t get you to where you want to go. Performance just can’t deliver that way. It takes promise, not performance. But the promise enables you,

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empowers you to be what you are called to be. I just wanted to point this out. There are so many reasons, ways and applications we can get from that.

Let me finish up by just pulling on one more strand here—practicing our baptism. I want to note this dynamic called *the one and the many*. It’s very philosophical, but let’s break that down.

Paul says in verse 28 that baptism brings you into the church and it makes you part of one family. You are all one in Christ. So Christians are ones who are united to Christ and united to one another, and incorporated into this one big Abrahamic family.

Participant: Amen.

Mark: So we are one. There is a deep unity at the heart of our collective identity, this irreducibly common and shared identity as a church.

But then, right before that, he says that the promises extend to both Jew and Greek. There’s no difference in terms of inheriting the fulfillment of the promise. Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. So we’ve got ethnic difference—Jew or Greek, socioeconomic difference—slave or free, and then sexual distinction—male and female.

Participant: Amen.

Mark: Some commentators have said that this is probably based on this prayer that Jews made, when they would thank God that they were not born a Gentile, a slave or a woman, and that Paul is subverting that by the gospel, saying, “You don’t get special social status if you’re Jewish, free or a man.” It doesn’t give you special status in the kingdom or in the church. Gentiles, slaves and females inherit the same promise. They get the same blessings of the one promise, right?

And of course I hope no one is reading this as this diversity is eradicated. It’s not. It’s relativized. It’s put into its proper place. The distinctions aren’t done away with. When you walk into a church, we’re not all of a sudden androgynous beings, right? We’re not sexless. We don’t lose our social economic standing. And you don’t all of a sudden lose your ethnicity when you walk into a church.

So there is this irreducible oneness. We’re part of the one family of God. But we’re immensely diverse!—socioeconomically, ethnically. And I guess there is so much that we can say. I guess I basically just want to say that in this unity and diversity we have to reckon with both of those. We can’t expect a church to be uniform.

Participant: That’s right.

Mark: But we can’t just be these little silos of diversity that don’t see ourselves as having a deep, irreducible togetherness in our union with Christ, in our status as part of the family of God. There’s this one and many. There’s this unity and diversity that is always at work. And it’s messy!

I’ll give you one practical example of how to see if you’re trying to impose a certain kind of uniformity or unity over against the diversity, or diversity over against unity. You know, if you are in a church and there is nothing about the life of your church that grates against you, or that you would choose differently, you might be in a shrine with your name on it, right? (*Laughter.*) If all the music is pleasing to you, if all the style, if all the activities and *koinonia*, all the different expressions of the *koinonia* in the life of the body—if all of that is to your liking,—

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Participant: You’re in the wrong place.

Mark: Then you have to think about what’s going on there. Because there is such a diversity of people, and diversities within diversities and all that stuff, the life of the church in some places should not cater to your preferences. And in other places it will. So if you demand a certain kind of music, it shouldn’t be all so uniform that it just pleases you in every respect and in every regard. Does that make sense?

Participant: That’s complacency, just giving in to whatever, and not really hanging on to the grace that’s given by Christ, and growing individually.

Mark: Yes, being selfish. Yes?

Participant: It also denies various spiritual gifts in the body.

Mark: Oh yes. Absolutely.

Participant: I’ve been thinking about what you have been saying and kind of tying it into the different gifts mentioned in places like 1 Corinthians 12 and 14.

Mark: Yes.

Participant: And the way the gifts operate just like the parts of the body.

Mark: Right. Yes, absolutely. There’s a spiritual diversity too, just like my brother is pointing out. There are all types of diversity. Here it is—the socioeconomic, the ethnic, obviously male and female.

You know, I met a missionary in the Middle East. And he was pastoring a church. And when he got there, this church had a huge veil down the middle, and you know where this is going. On the one side it was all men and the other side was women, distinguishing sex in such a stark way.

Now you obviously have to work through what’s cultural, what’s essentially theological. But there’s something so stark. That’s not how a family operates.

Participant: Amen.

Second Participant: Was this a Christian church?

Mark: Yes, it was a Christian church. And that’s part of the culture. And I’ve heard and read different missionaries in different traditional cultures. Some of these distinctions are played out in such stark ways, and you’ve got to work through some of that.

But the point being is that there has got to be an appreciation of diversity—spiritual gifts, socioeconomic status. There’s just this reality that we are one. So what unites us is bigger, stronger, more powerful, more real, more defining than what is different about us. But we’re different in all these ways and then some. Yes?

Participant: Fleeing from diversity is probably one of the main reasons why the church is so fractured. We really just want to be with our own, whether that’s racially or whether it’s theologically.

Mark: Yes. Very true. We’re consumers. I mean the culture is a consumer marketplace, right? We pick MacDonald’s versus Wendy’s. We pick the church, and congregations vote with their feet. They go and leave the places where they feel comfortable. And so what happens is that we have little ethnic conclaves. So we could have a big black Baptist church right down the street and a big white Anglican church up the street, right? And we can have a Latino Baptist church, right? It’s a consumer marketplace. We’re not paraspace. We don’t just go to the church that’s around the corner

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from us. We get in the cars and drive to the one that suits our preferences. So some of that fights against this collective diversity that should be put on display.

There’s so much here. I just wanted to point out that our baptism defines us as being part of this family that is diverse, but one, where there is deep, deep, deep unity, but diversity, where there’s a oneness, but the many-ness. And there are just so many interpretations of how we work that out.

Well, we’re out of time. Unless—are we done?

Participant: You’re done when you’re done. If they have to go, they can leave. C’mon now, keep going! (*Laughter.*)

Mark: I’m sorry. All right, I laid that out. Let’s talk about this a little bit more. Does anybody have comments or anything? Yes, sir?

Participant: Oneness in unity, but still many as a Christian community is mirroring the likeness and nature of God as revealed in the Trinity.

Mark: Absolutely. One in Three.

Participant: (*Unclear.*) This teaching is later in Scripture where it says, “*Since we are therefore surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.*” I believe that’s in Hebrews 12.

Mark: Yes, Don?

Don: I do have a question. I’m going to put a little fly in the ointment.

Mark: Okay.

Don: Talking about the fact that we have diversity and unity, someone made the comment earlier that we tend to associate with those with whom we gravitate toward, whether it’s ethnically or theologically.

Mark: Mm-hmm.

Don: But isn’t it important that we do have a theological standard, for example? Otherwise, we would have chaos. We would have confusion. We would have false teaching.

Mark: Absolutely.

Don: How do we balance that?

Mark: Now that’s the question. The question is not do we need unity of doctrine? Paul says that there is “*one Spirit, one baptism*”, right? The question is where are the lines? And that’s what the seven major ecumenical councils hammered out, or were trying to hammer out over centuries—the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed. All these different creeds sought to say, “Here’s what it means to be a Christian.”

So I think that’s a process, Don. I think it’s the Holy Spirit working over time in history who is constantly marking out the true people of God. As we look back, we go, “Okay, we have all these creeds. We have these seven big creeds and councils. And I know that as a Christian I’ve got to be Trinitarian in this particular way. I have to believe this about the work of Christ and the Person of Christ.” So there is that.

I guess I want to say this. And I don’t want to sound post-modern in this way. I want to say that it is provisional and fixed. And history plays this out. Of course it’s important. The assumption is that we have to have unity.

I’m a PCA minister. I signed on to the line of the Westminster Standards. And yet, I quibble a little bit about Sabbath, and exactly how we define covenant. Yet I’m a part of

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that. That’s my little circle. But I’m part of the bigger circle. We say the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. I’m part of the bigger circle. I don’t know if that answers the question.

Don: No, that’s fine. I guess I’m a little sensitive, since I am involved in music.

Mark: Oh yes.

Don: I don’t think that I would like heavy metal at a worship service.

Mark: Right.

Don: And I don’t like “seven/eleven songs.

Mark: Seven words eleven times. *(Laughter.)* I agree. I have a theology of music and worship. You know, I don’t like endless songs of human composure that say, ‘I did this. I feel that.’ I like the firm articulation and enunciation of the character of god and the Person and work of Christ, right?

Participant: Yes.

Mark: And I like long verses and eloquent words.

Don: Yes.

Mark: Yet you have to work through this. When is that just my personal preference? And when am I making it impossible for a new believer?

Don: Yes.

Mark: So there are standards for music. But there are also issues of mission, diversity and inclusion that should not violate our union.

Participant: Amen.

Mark: So it’s a dynamic.

Participant: We have to major on the majors.

Mark: Yes. And even that requires definition, right? Work it out within the context of your body. Whatever body you’re in, you’ve got to work that out. There’s mission. There’s wisdom. There’s the Holy Spirit working in that particular expression of Christ’s body, working out the particulars. I just wanted to lay out a general dynamic. Yes, sir?

Participant: I think, especially in the day and age we live in, that we’re getting away from the guidelines of the Bible. If we stay true to the guidelines of the bible, it’s from Genesis 1 to the end of it.

Mark: Right.

Participant: But we’re getting away from it. We’re putting all this other stuff in there.

Mark: Absolutely.

Participant: We have to put it in there and make it work. But it doesn’t work because that’s what you need—the guidelines of the Bible.

Mark: Yes, sir.

Participant: You need to stay within that structure, and it helps us. Now we won’t make mistakes. But still that guideline helps us stay within the word of God and stay there. We’re not going off on all these other tangents.

Mark: Yes, sir. You know, the first thing when you study denominations and the history of the church, one of the first things that goes, particularly in the West, is the authority of Scripture. We’re such a democratized society in the West that we’ve lost a firm sense of trembling at the law of God. And then everything is up for debate at that

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point—marriage, everything just becomes negotiable once you stop humbly listening to what God says.

Participant: What baptism you use? (*Laughter.*) Sorry; I had to throw that in.

Second Participant: There was a study done by one of the Baptist conventions a number of years ago on what people actually believed. And they found that most of the parishioners didn't really know what they believed. They didn't understand the theology. They attended church because they liked the culture. So I was thinking of what Don said. I went to a Missouri Synod Lutheran church one time, and the music was Nine Inch Nails. But it was gospel words. Now I don't like that music. But the theology part was correct. From a cultural standpoint, I thought, “I don't belong here. But this is interesting.” I think it's a matter of where you are. Are you using it because of your culture, or because of what God says?

Mark: That's good. In context, you just pointed this out. You are becoming a Greek to the Greeks and a Jew to the Jews. A church in the highlands of Scotland is not going to be like a church in the back woods of Louisiana or Western Pennsylvania. Those are some of the wisdom issues that merge out of thinking deeply about our unity in diversity.

Participant: We change the method but not the message.

Mark: Right.

Participant: But Mark, the point is that what I've been harping on, to everyone's boredom, is that the idea of unity is not taught in most evangelical churches. I mean honoring our diversity and our uniqueness and our Cajunness or our Scottishness, that is what we do.

Mark: Yes.

Participant: I mean we don't talk or theologize about the unity of the body.

Mark: Right.

Participant: And we don't even think about how we implement that.

Mark: Yes. I agree.

Participant: So that you have an evangelical church in a community near here, and another evangelical church moves into the community saying, “We're coming in here because there's no other evangelical church in the community.” (*Laughter.*) That was their statement.

Mark: Right.

Participant: That happens. And so, in the end, we just ignore it completely. It's like racial separation before the Civil Rights movement. We just went along with it and didn't think about it. I was raised in a home where we had a black maid who came in and cleaned the house. We didn't even think about her. And that's what we have today. We have that unity. So diversity? Absolutely. Scottishness versus Cajunness? Yes, absolutely. But in the end, we do not think seriously about the unity of the body of Christ. Everybody goes off and does their own thing. I'm going to shut up, okay? That's enough.

Mark: I agree, brother. Yes, sir. Thank you. Yes?

Participant: Mark, I have two comments. One is this. We also find today that Galatians 3:28, this passage about no diversity, all one, can be used to wipe out the diversity.

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Mark: Right.

Participant: And the second one is that there are other passages of Scripture that suggest that this diversity was God-given by creation and that it’s intended to abide.

Mark: Right.

Participant: But people confuse this and say, “Oh, but that’s over with the death of Christ.” We struggle with that, for instance, with the ordination of women in different denominations.

Mark: Right.

Participant: That’s one point. The other point I want to say is that it seems to me that the big trick is how do you live by grace in a world and culture that works by performance? Even with families, there’s a deep sense in which, it seems to me, that we want to be living under grace in the midst of other people thinking that we’re basically behaving through performance. In other words, I may want to work hard at my work. And not in order just to please these people, but because that’s where I went on missions for Christ. It looks the same, but it’s really quite different.

Mark: Yes.

Participant: The problem, though, is that I often fall back under the law myself to try to please Him.

Mark: Yes, sir. That’s good.

Participant: So that’s worthy of discussion—how one lives in grace in a world where performance is everything.

Mark: Amen. Yes, sir?

Participant: The real problem to me seems that when the children of Israel were in the wilderness, all they wanted to do was go back and make bricks for Pharaoh. And I see that in churches today. Give me something I can work on, something I can achieve, something I can do. It’s still based on performance.

Mark: Yes, right. Hey, you know, I would add that I think it’s a tribute to the human heart that we want self-justification, right? You don’t have to teach a two-year-old to try to wiggle his or her way out of trouble. *(Laughter.)* That’s self-justification, right? It’s a tribute to the human heart.

But I think there is a generation of young people that lacks ambition. There’s a kind of listlessness. And so perhaps grace needs to be taught in such a way that it encourages industry. Maybe another generation would seek their identity in performance. And we said, “Look! You can chill! God has given us one day in seven to show that the world doesn’t revolve around us.” Worship, right?

Participant: Amen.

Mark: You know, He tells us to rest one day so that the world goes and proceeds by God’s work, not ours. Everything keeps growing. The world keeps spinning if we’re not working. So some of this is contextual. But you’re right. There are a lot of people who are looking back at Egypt and wanting Egypt’s ways. Other comments? Yes, sir. A final comment, then we’ll pray.

Participant: The result is the absence of Scripture in life.

Mark: The absence of truth?

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Participant: Yes

Mark: What do you mean? Spell that out just a little bit.

Participant: Compromise.

Mark: Well, there’s definitely a lot of compromise.

Participant: Scripture is skipped. We want to be comfortable.

Second Participant: Not in the church.

First Participant: In the church. I believe that has led us away.

Mark: I completely agree. If the preaching doesn’t sing and sting, then perhaps you’re not getting the whole counsel of God.

Participant: Amen.

Mark: And you know, pastors feel this sense of pressure. They need a congregation to get a pay check. I hate to say that, right? And so there’s this tendency. The natural tendency is to mute some of the hard edges of gospel truth in order to avert trouble. And if you’re a people pleaser, your tendency is going to be a lot stronger. But yes, sir. We shouldn’t be compromising.

We’re going to need to pray. Let’s pray, okay. Father, thank You for this time. Thank You for Your word. Thank You for the truth of it. Cause it to sink deeply into our hearts. And Lord, would You refresh us in the good news that the promise, the inheritance is ours by promise and faith, not by our performance. And would You help us to work these things out. Make them more than just grand, noble ideas and theological truths, but ones that permeate every fabric of our being—truths which we embody in how we relate to one another—our families, our work mates, our friends, our churches. Lord, do help us. We pray for Your grace for the rest of this day. This is a day that You have given to us and we receive it as a gift. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Men: Amen. Thank you. (*Applause.*)