

THE LAW AND THE COVENANT
A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day and Hebrews 9
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Today, the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, we begin what is often called the second half of the Trinity Season. Of those first 12 Sundays after Trinity, the first five were devoted to God's love and His relation to man; the next five were devoted to the topic of Man's duty to God, while the last two were devoted to the doctrine of Grace, to show more fully how God demonstrates His love for mankind. The second half of the Trinity Season is not as orderly as the first half.

Pringles potato chips first hit the market in October of 1968, during the first term of President Nixon's administration. Henry Kissinger was his Secretary of State, and his German accent caused someone to come up with this riddle: "Why does Kissinger like Pringles? Because they are so orderly." Well, if Pringles are a metaphor for the first half of the Trinity season, what we shall have in the second half will be more like a bag of regular potato chips of mixed flavors. However, there is one underlying theme, and that is the Christian life.

Each Sunday provides an answer to the question, "How should we then live" with respect to some aspect of life. Today, we take a look at our relationship to our fellow men. In the first half of this season, we looked at God's love for us, and our duty to Him, part of which includes loving Him. The Collect tells us that the only gift we can really give to God is "true and laudable service". One illustration of that true and laudable service to God is to show love for our fellow man, as is shown in the Gospel lesson, which is the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Now, I am not going to give you yet another sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I know that most of you have already heard many sermons on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and that you also know that there is probably nobody in the world who can say something new about that parable. However, those of you who came to church today knowing that the Gospel lesson would be this parable do not get to take a nap during the sermon because I am not going to preach about the Good Samaritan. This is because something happened this past week that is covered by some of what St. Paul said to the Galatians in our Epistle lesson. So, I get to talk about one of my favorite topics in Theology, and not in a high-falutin, abstruse way. It comes down to a very nitty-gritty area of human behavior.

First, let's look at the Epistle lesson in a general way, and then get down to some specifics. I hope you will follow along in your Bibles. starting at Gal. 1:1. Some of the first things we need to look at are very obvious; but they give us the context, so we have to keep them in mind. First of all, the Epistle to the Galatians is an epistle, a letter, a letter written by St. Paul Galatians 1:2 "To the churches of Galatia". What was called Galatia at that time was a region in what is now central Turkey. St. Paul had visited the southern part of that region in each of his three missionary journeys and presumably planted churches there, probably on the first of his three journeys to that region in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe. There may have been others as well.

Why did he write the letter? The letter itself makes that clear, and that is the general context of the entire Epistle. The specific context of our lesson today is everything in the epistle that precedes it. After his standard salutation, St. Paul rebukes his former parishes with strong words in Galatians 1:6-9: 6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

These are strong words, to say that an angel would be cursed if it were to preach a false Gospel. Part of this desertion of the Gospel St. Paul had preached to them was caused by those whom we now call, the Judaizers. They were Jews who had converted to belief in Jesus Christ, but who felt that all converts to Christ, even Gentiles had to subject themselves to all of the Law of Moses, including the fact that all of the males had to undergo a circumcision. If you will sometime read for yourselves just the first few chapters of Galatians, you will see that this "Judaizing" is mostly what St. Paul is arguing against while at the same time he is arguing **for** the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Immediately after the indictment that I just read to you from Chapter 1, St. Paul takes the rest of Chapter 1 and all of Chapter 2 to repeat to them his bona fides, of how he received the Gospel he preaches to them, of how he and "his" Gospel are accepted by the Apostles in Jerusalem, and of how he corrected St. Peter's Judaizing, and that his correction of St. Peter was accepted.

In that defense of himself and his Gospel, St. Paul begins to argue in Chapter 2, verse:15 that justification cannot come by the works of the Law, but comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Then, in chapter 3, he gets down to some specifics: Galatians 3:1-2 ESV ¹O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. St. Paul is truly concerned that they may have fallen under the spell of some demonic power, but he quickly changes the subject to the importance of faith in the reception and continued presence of the Holy Spirit. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? After a few verses on this, he identifies the sons of Abraham in Galatians 3:7 ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. – those of faith, not those who only follow the Law. Circumcision was not the only thing the Judaizers wanted; they also wanted the Gentile converts to observe the Jewish Holy Days such as Passover, as if that had anything to do with salvation. But those who are justified by faith, he identifies as those who receive a blessing through Abraham: Galatians 3:8-9 ⁸“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, **“In you shall all the nations be blessed.”** ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”, which means that those who have faith in Jesus Christ are considered to be the children, of Abraham and thus, are blessed.

St. Paul then argues in verses 10 – 14 that those under the Law are cursed, using as points in his argument, quotations from Habakkuk, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. The quotation from Habakkuk is from our OT lesson, and is Habakkuk 2:4 ⁴ “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. The other quotes are Deut. 27:26 in verse 10 and Leviticus 18:5 in verse 12. The quote, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” is an English translation of St Paul’s translation of Deut. 21:23 into Greek. It’s not exact, but it carries the same meaning.

Now we come to verse 15, which most Bibles and most commentaries put in a separate section with the rest of the chapter. I think that verse 15 of chapter 3 should be the first verse of the Epistle lesson. It says this: Galatians 3:15 ¹⁵ To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. This verse puts the rest of the Epistle lesson in the context of what is called Covenant Theology, especially because St. Paul is about to explain God’s promises to Abraham and to us through Jesus Christ in terms of covenants.

There is a thing about covenants in the Bible that is quite different from how we use the word nowadays, and that is precisely what St. Paul is emphasizing in verse 15: once a covenant has

been ratified, it can't be revoked or annulled; and it cannot be changed. To emphasize this immutability of a covenant, he specifies that this is true even of a covenant made by people between people. The modern definitions usually equate a covenant with a contract, or even a single clause in a contract. Most everybody knows that the parties to a contract can begin to re-negotiate the contract five minutes after it is signed. Not so with covenants. In Biblical times, covenants were sealed with blood, usually the blood of animals as in the sealing of the God's Covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. The only way a covenant can be cancelled is by the deaths of those who are a party to it, and sometimes not even then. God's two Covenants with Abraham each extended beyond Abraham's death, especially the covenant made in Genesis 17 in which promised Abraham, that: Genesis 17:6-7 **6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.** This sets up an irrevocable and ever-lasting trust between God and Abraham's offspring,... forever(!); and we have to remember that St. Paul told us who those offspring are in verse 3:9 – those of faith!

With this in mind, now let's look the Epistle lesson, verses 16-22. St. Paul explains that the term, *seed*, is not plural, but singular, a collective singular in the case of Abraham's offspring, but a singular in the case of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who is also of Abraham's seed. Then he tells us that the giving of the Law to Moses 430 years later does not, indeed, cannot make this covenant null and void. Then in verse 18, he tells us that no matter what, the blessing comes to us by the promise to Abraham through faith and not by the Law.

“Why then the Law?” he asks. The best explanation I have ever seen of what St. Paul wrote in the next few verses is given by G. Walter Hansen in his commentary on Galatians. He says: “[T]he law has a negative purpose. It was added because of transgressions.(v. 19). Paul has already demonstrated what the Law does not do: it does not make anyone righteous before God (v. 18); it is not based on faith (v. 12); [and] it is not the basis of inheritance (v. 18)... The Law was given to show sinners just how sinful they (we) are, how far we deviate from God's standards. Verse 19 says in part: Galatians 3:19 “**19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made,**” “The law was added.” Hansen says that that this “implies that the law was not a central theme in God's redemptive plan; it was supplementary and secondary to the enduring covenant made with

Abraham. As the word, *added*, marks the beginning point of the Mosaic law, the word, *until*, marks its end point. The Mosaic law came into effect at a certain point in history and was in effect only until the promised *Seed*, Christ, appeared.” In other words, the Promise was permanent, while the Law was temporary. The mediator of the Law was Moses, who put it into effect, but he received it in pieces from God and from angels who are many, which to St. Paul indicates its inferiority to the Promise which was given only by God, who is One. St. Paul concludes this by noting that the Law could not give life because righteousness was not decreed by the Law, so our only possibility for salvation is described in the last part of verse 22:

Galatians 3:22 [so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.](#)

Covenants are very strong stuff. Our eyes ought to open wide when we see a covenant being talked about in the Bible. There is however, one small note of caution about the word *covenant*; we need to be careful that the context makes it the right word. The problem is this: the Greek word translated as *covenant*, is **διαθήκη**, which also can be translated as *testament*, as in a last will and testament. There is no other word in Greek that means covenant or testament and never means the other; **διαθήκη** is it for either one. This doesn't get messed up in English translations very often, but when it does it can be confusing, as it is in Hebrews 9. I encourage you to read Hebrews 9 from both the KJV and the ESV side by side. You will see that verses 15-18 are not translated there to give the same meaning. In my opinion, on that passage, the ESV has it right, while the KJV is confusing. Here is something to think about: the names of the two halves of the Bible, really should be called, the “Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant”. It was Jesus' blood sealed that the New Covenant; and He is the mediator of that New Covenant, which is also the last Covenant and is the culmination of all the covenants. What's more, not one of the covenants annulled any that preceded it; each one merely expanded the scope of the preceding ones. The covenants in the Bible that are made by God are God's promises to all mankind. Be thankful that we are the recipients of such grace.

Now lets look at how a prominent Christian stuck his foot rather deeply into his mouth this past week and besmirched a human covenant of the sort that St. Paul says cannot annulled or added to once it has been ratified. This past Wednesday on the 700 Club, Pat Robertson left the reservation. Here is the story:

Pat Robertson advised a viewer of yesterday's 700 Club to avoid putting a “guilt trip” on those who want to divorce a spouse with Alzheimer's. During the show's advice segment, a viewer asked

Robertson how she should address a friend who was dating another woman “because his wife as he knows her is gone.” Robertson said he would not fault anyone for doing this. He then went further by saying it would be understandable to divorce a spouse with the disease.

“That is a terribly hard thing,” Robertson said. “I hate Alzheimer’s. It is one of the most awful things because here is a loved one—this is the woman or man that you have loved for 20, 30, 40 years. And suddenly that person is gone. They’re gone. They are gone. So, what he says basically is correct. But I know it sounds cruel, but if he’s going to do something he should divorce her and start all over again. But to make sure she has custodial care and somebody looking after her.”

Co-host Terry Meeuwsen asked Pat, “But isn’t that the vow that we take when we marry someone? That it’s for better or for worse. For richer or poorer?”

Robertson’s reply was glib, but not satisfying.

Robertson said that the viewer’s friend could obey this vow of “death till you part” because the disease was a “kind of death.” Robertson said he would understand if someone started another relationship out of a need for companionship.

Nobody quoted that part of the vows that says, “In sickness and in health.” I do not say this to make anyone uncomfortable because I know that many here have been divorced; but I view the taking of the marriage vows as the making of a covenant, a human covenant that cannot, or at least should not, be broken. Jesus hates divorce, but even He allowed for a few reasons that a divorce could be granted.

Covenants are not contracts. Marriage cannot be renegotiated. There are too many stories of people who hung on taking care of a spouse with Alzheimer’s disease. Abandonment may be a reasonable ground for divorce, especially when the spouse, who left, has gone and remarried; but the fading away of someone from Alzheimer’s is not an act of volition.

Marriage is a covenantal relationship. God meant it to be so, as Jesus said in Matthew 19:5-6 **5 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."**

Covenants are strong, very strong. They are meant to be so and should not be set aside by someone with a facile wit. Thanks be to God that He has given us His Word in the Covenant of Redemption through the Blood of Jesus Christ. Let us rejoice in being members of the Covenant of salvation through Jesus Christ. AMEN!