

SERMON: "BIBLE BASICS – PAUL'S LETTERS"

**TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT
NEW TESTAMENT**

**GALATIANS 3:23-29
ROMANS 8:28-39**

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Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

Ever had a good idea that you later realize is not a good idea

Here's an example from right here in this room featuring this guy?

I wanted to make the annual meeting more lively and wanted to emphasize a change we would be making to make room in this "Place for Everyone."

I suggested in staff meeting that we ought to have space for people in wheelchairs to sit somewhere in addition to the back – to make more space by cutting off some pews in the front and in the Presbyterian middle which is 2/3 of the way back
I thought it would be fun to use a saw to do that during the meeting

Our very wise staff responded with "Dave, that is one of the worst ideas I ever heard."
Point taken. We cut a pew in half beforehand and just pulled it apart during the meeting – less of a shock, less saw dust, less noise

This may again be one of those lessons learned by trial and error

I thought (and still think) this overview of the bible – Bible Basics is helpful

I think it helps to see the major themes, the key movements in the bible

It helps us focus on what's most important - major in the majors, not the minors

But trying to preach a sermon on all of the letters of Paul? What was I thinking?

Paul's letters from Romans through Philemon (the books are arranged not by the date they were written but by length – longest to shortest) ...

They cover a lot of ground from general themes (grace, unity)

to specific arguments addressed to specific churches. Lots of material

Those general themes repeated throughout his letters are where I will focus

this sermon because what someone says time and again is worth listening to more so than what they said that one time to those people about that problem

Think of it this way. Do you want to be remembered for that one time

where you said something a bit too pointed or remembered more for the points you consistently made not only with your logic but also backed up with your life?

That reasoning holds true for the whole of scripture and especially so for Paul

I am convinced that Paul did not write his letters thinking, "Hey, this will be part of a holy book someday." God, through the Spirit, took these letters and gave them authority that we might learn from the earliest Christians

PAUL & THE SACRAMENTS

I'd like to focus our attention today on two things Paul emphasized throughout his letters. I'd suggest most everything he says is tied into, even fed by these two things – God's steadfast and sure love for us
"Call it what it is, call it grace!" and, in response, our love for one another
Paul was very much about being one in Christ, about unity

Before we focus on grace and unity as the connective tissue in Paul's letters let me explain the hymns for today

We try to select hymns and songs around the central themes of the sermon but not today. Our two hymns are focused on the sacraments – baptism and holy communion. Jesus gave us these two with his own baptism and by taking bread and cup to symbolize his body and blood

Jesus gave us the sacraments. Paul then builds on them, does some explaining
The words of institution we use are from Jesus' own words at the Last Supper and from Paul's recollection of that sacrifice and symbolism.
We read in First Corinthians, chapter eleven

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Paul with his letters and with his life was all about planting and raising up churches
A shared language about how to do things, how to think about them was helpful
The shared meal that would become a sacrament helped unite the church

And the language that he used to talk about baptism as our dying and rising with Christ in his death and resurrection reinforced the primary message of Jesus, crucified and risen, through a shared practice
We hear Paul's use of that imagery in Romans, chapter 6

Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.

Paul's letters were very much about walking in that newness of life following Jesus
In his letters Paul gives us a foundation – God's grace
and he gives us a direction – to be one in Christ, together!

A STUBBORN LOVE WE CALL GRACE

We begin with that foundation, with God's steadfast love, with grace.

Let me then ask a question. Do any of you have stubbornness in your family tree?
I've seen in my family a time or two ... anybody else spot some stubbornness?
I think I know where it comes from. Maybe we got it from our Creator

When it comes to loving us, God seems rather stubborn

I want us to look at Romans, Paul's longest letter and the only one he writes
before he actually gets a chance to know the people there.

As an introduction of sorts, Romans gives us the highlights of Paul's theology
This is one of the most comforting passages of scripture, Romans 8

Any of you list makers? Ever make a list of things that might go wrong?

These verses seem to have Paul going through lists like those, two of them

**Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress
or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, in all
these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us.
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love
of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

The question about what might separate us from God's love in Christ

is one such list ... will affliction or distress or persecution and so on

The answer also works through a list ... neither death, not life and so on

Neither list is meant to be exhaustive. He is just giving us examples

He makes that known with how the chapter ends ...

**nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

This is the steadfast love repeated in every verse of Psalm 136, like a couplet,

that we used as our Call to Worship. God's love is steadfast and sure, stubborn

This the stubborn love, the foundational love that God has for us

Always has, always will. This is the stubborn love Paul calls grace

Yes. It is an amazing grace, a grace that breaks our chains.

It is also an initiating grace. God's love always comes first

Any time we religious folks forget that we tend to make a mess of things

We may debate which came first the chicken or the egg

But one thing is certain ... Grace comes first

Grace is the foundation of everything that follows

It's like Paul is telling us in a multitude of ways "God loves us, therefore ..."

The main "God loves us, therefore ..." in Paul's letters is to be one in Christ

SUMMARY

Paul talks about unity using lots of exhortation and lots of examples
The image of the Church as the body of Christ is a great image and example

I visit people in the hospital often. I hear the medical staff and the patients talk about how one thing affects another. How one medicine mixes with another, how you have to treat this and that. Paul does the same thing talking about how one part of the body needs another. It takes every part working together as one body
It takes balance, mutual understanding and support. It takes unity.

Paul's letters are written to communities of faith trying to figure out how to be one in Christ, how to be together and stay together
Most of his letters are responses to an argument he's heard about
He speaks to a particular people and their particular problems, like the good folk in Corinth who spoke in tongues acting like they were better

The issues in each town were unique to them in their own way.
At the same time, all those unique issues were all some kind of division problem
And I'm not just talking math here, I'm talking about break ups, splits ...
Times where being right seems more important than making it right

Before I quote Paul from his letter to the Galatians, let me remind you what my mom said trying to ease her teenage son's anxiety about playing golf for the first time. She comforted me by saying, "Son, You won't be the best golfer out there, you won't be the worst either. There will be someone there today worse than you."

Good advice that wasn't heard with the clarity needed. She was telling me to relax and have fun. Instead, I spent the whole day looking for that golfer the one worse than me. Took me about 14-15 holes.

Seems to me most of our divisions are us not listening to our parents' advice very well. Instead of relaxing and having a good time, we spend our time looking for someone we might say is worse. Instead of focusing on what unites us, that gift of grace given to you and me, us and them. We look at our differences ... And we end up doing division.

The way I read Paul's letters, he was much more about addition than division
Talking directly to the differences that can all too easily divide us,
Paul wrote to the church in Galatia and to this church in Iowa

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.