

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

What do I need to do to be a Christian?

Following Jesus is not about what we do but what Jesus has done.

Scripture: Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

Rev. Steve Filyk

May 23, 2020

Pentecost & Reconciliation Sunday

Opening Hymn: #370 -- Hallelujah! sing to Jesus (1,2)

Closing Hymn: We are God's people (ccli)

Choruses: #400 -- Spirit of the living God & One more contemporary

There are many different identities that we earn.

There are many different identities that we maintain.

I had a plumber visit my house this past week.

I could have watched a couple of YouTube videos
and run that line myself...

But I wanted someone
with training and experience
to know that the job was done right.

Becoming a certified plumber in BC involves a combination
Of many hours work experience
and in-school training
which held in a number of six to eight-week blocks.ⁱ

The man who came to my house
Had completed this work experience and training.
He earned that right to be called a plumber.

Some identities we earn.
Others are given at birth and maintained.

Many of the Presbyterian churches in Canada
Were founded by Scottish immigrants.

Some Scottish men maintain their heritage
By wearing skirts
By throwing telephone poles
And by eating a mixture of oatmeal and organ meat
Encased in sheep's stomachs.

Some identities we earn.
Others are maintained by unique
And unusual practises.

So how about being a follower of Jesus?

What is involved in becoming a Christian?

What is involved in remaining a Christian?

Does it involve developing a taste for choral music and hymn singing?

Does it involve dressing modestly and abstaining from alcohol?

Does it involve embracing a middle-class lifestyle:

graduating from high-school, getting married, having kids

(all in this order)?

Maybe you've never spent much time thinking about this...

But this was a real issue in the early church.

You will recall that Christianity began with Jesus,

Jesus was born a Jew, circumcised as a child,

And grew up observing the laws of his people.

Jesus called the God of Israel, his father.

Jesus' ministry was focused on the people of Israel

Within the geographic borders of his homeland.

Jesus' helpers, Jesus' disciples, were Jewish like he was.

Jesus was Jewish.

But his mission was bigger

than that religious and ethnic identity.

After Jesus' death and resurrection

He promised his disciples that they would be his witnesses,

Both in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.

On Pentecost we remember how the Spirit

fills Jesus' disciples courage and power.

They share Jesus' story with their people in Jerusalem.

When persecution breaks out, many leave Jerusalem

And their witness expands to people who aren't Jewish,

Their witness expand to people living outside their homeland.

Paul takes Jesus' message far away into

What is now modern-day Turkey and Greece.

The followers he recruits are primarily Gentiles.

But if Jesus was a Jew,

If Jesus practised Jewish laws and customs,

Did these Gentile converts also need to become Jewish
to follow Jesus?

This is one of the big questions confronted by the early church.

Even though the Jerusalem Council affirmed that it was not necessary,
 Some Jewish Christians begin telling the new Gentile converts
 That they need to be circumcised,
 They need to keep Kosher,
 They need to be Jews to follow Jesus,
 And be saved.

This would have been practical.
 How is the new church to have potlucks
 If one group lives off a limited menu
 While the other eats everything under the sun?

This would have been politically astute.
 Judaism was officially recognised by the Empire
 Bringing the new converts under the umbrella of Judaism
 Could save ALL the Christians a lot of unwanted attention.

Finally, this would have fit their narrow theological vision.
 They thought that God's work was limited to Israel.
 To take part in it you simply needed to become a Jew.

But "Paul rejects this answer..."

[He reasoned that] To keep [even] one part of the law only...
 Undermine[d] the foundational gospel claim
 that human righteousness is the result of divine action,
 not human obedience. ^{“ii}

Paul rejects this answer and confronts this activity.
 His words for those who are adopting Jewish practises are strong.
 "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you!"

Paul asks them if they received the Holy Spirit
 By keeping the Jewish law.
 Of course not.

Paul asks them if the gift of this Spirit
 and the miracles they observed
 Followed a conversion to Judaism.
 Of course not.

These gifts were given as they trusted in the what they heard about Jesus.

Paul reminds the Galatians
 That being in a right relationship with God
 Come from trusting in Jesus,

Not as a consequence of following Jewish customs and laws.

But Paul goes further to explain this
In terms of his own Jewish tradition.

He tells the people that a right relationship with God
was from the very beginning a gift.
It was a promise to Abraham.

God called Abraham and spoke of many blessings.
And when Abraham took God at God's word
God considered Abraham 'righteous'.

Abraham didn't do anything,
Abraham didn't perform any action.
Abraham simply trusted and believed.

So then, what is all this business about the law?

Paul tells us that law (which was provided 430 after Abraham)
Was provided as a guardian, a teacher for the people.

The law kept people getting at each other's throats.
The law showed them how to get along with God and each other.

But if the law was effective at restraining evil and discord,
It did not provide any righteous standing.
Righteousness could not be earned.
It was 100% gift.

This is underscored in the coming of Jesus.

Paul sees Jesus' arrival as the great fulfillment
of the promise to Abraham.

The promise stated that 'all nations' will be blessed through Abraham.
This is what the people have experienced in Jesus.

The other nations did not become Jewish
But were blessed through Abraham's descendent Jesus.
In Jesus they (we) also become Abraham's heirs.

Like Abraham they are called to trust.
They (we) are called to trust in Jesus as the way
to enter and remain in a right relationship with God.

PAUSE

For Paul it makes no sense for Gentiles
 to adopt Jewish customs and practises.
 Being in right relationship with God
 Cannot be acquired and maintain by human activity,
 It can only be accepted as a gift.

But if following Jesus does not require you to be Jewish,
 It doesn't require you to be Canadian,
 or a capitalist, or an individualist.

It doesn't demand that you have European heritage
 Or values that are distinctively liberal and middle-class.

Part of the damage the Canadian church has done to our aboriginal sisters and brothers
 Has been the result of misunderstand what puts us in a right relationship with God;
 Has been the result of failing to distinguishing
 between our faith and our culture.

In the past our nation's leaders and our church leaders
 Often made very little distinction between western cultural values
 And a desire to welcome Jesus.

And so valuable ceremonies like the potlach were banned
 And destructive institutions like residential schools were established.

We failed to recognise that Jesus doesn't require assimilation,
 But that trust in him is a gift that clothes us and unifies us
 In our inherent distinctiveness.

So again, what needs to be accomplished to become a Christian?
 How do we maintain our membership in the community of faith?

Do we need to listen to praise music in the car?
 Do we need to forgo that glass of wine at dinner?
 Do we need to sit on a church committee?
 Do we need to start reading the National Post?

No. All that was need has been accomplished.

What needs to be done was accomplished one dark afternoon
 at a place outside of Jerusalem called Golgotha.

God's own son was nailed to a Roman cross.

Jesus, the righteous one
 Was convicted a criminal,
 And sentence to death.

In doing so he bore the punishment for our sin.

All that remained unfinished was accomplished later that weekend.

God raised Jesus back to life
 So that he could conquer both sin and death.
 So today we might live in the power of the Spirit.

PAUSE

Maybe you've been led to believe that being right with God
 is about doing the right things, to gain a little credit.

Maybe you've been led to believe that being right with God
 is mimicking the behavior of others in the church.

The truth is that it is all about Jesus
 And the gift that comes by faith in him.

If this is the first time that this has made sense to you
 I invite you to join me in a short prayer
 Of faith and commitment.

God... I know I am a sinner.
 I don't do the good things I know I should do.
 And there are many things I've done that I now regret.
 I am sorry for the ways
 I have failed to live up to your good intentions for me.

At the same time, I recognise
 That I lack the ability, even the desire
 To embrace your good intentions.

Thank you for sending your son Jesus.
 He did what I could not.
 He lived the life you desire.
 And he took the just punishment for my sins.

Take hold of my heart, my mind, my life I pray.
 Send your Holy Spirit to me.
 Fill me with the Spirit's love and power.
 And show me now that I am your adopted child
 Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ See "Explore Careers" by WorkBC www.workbc.ca/Jobs-Careers/Explore-Careers/Browse-Career-Profile/7251#job-requirements

ⁱⁱ Douglas, M. (2010). Theological Perspective on Galatians 3:23–29. In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 3, p. 162). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.