

Dave Johnson

Sermon: “You Belong to Christ” (Galatians 3:23-29)

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Last week I preached from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians on justification by faith, that we are made righteous in God’s eyes solely through faith in Jesus Christ and his atoning death on the cross for us, that we are not able to pay our sin debt to God but that God in his mercy paid that debt in full in Christ. Today I’m preaching again from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, specifically on one phrase from today’s passage: “you belong to Christ.” Paul writes, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

We all have a deep need to belong, although the famous comedian, Groucho Marx, famously quipped, “I don’t want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member.” The famous psychologist Abraham Maslow placed the need to belong in his hierarchy of five basic human needs. The need to belong is not something we develop over time. The need to belong is not an acquired taste. The need to belong is rooted deep within us, even Groucho Marx. God wired us in such a way that we need to belong.

On this Father’s Day I’ll share one of my favorite memories of my dad. When I was in 5th grade, in the middle of winter, the Harlem Globetrotters came to the Capital Centre in Maryland (it was demolished in 2002, but used to be the home of the Washington Capitals and the then, Washington Bullets). It was a Saturday afternoon and a big winter storm moved into the area. I was worried and thought we’d end of skipping the game. But not my dad ☺. I remember helping him put bags of cement in the trunk of his Chevy for extra weight, along with blankets and a snow shovel. On our way to the game we stopped at a 7-11 and got hot chocolate and cookies. As we drove through the snow my dad was grinning, “This is fun!” Hardly anyone else went to see the Globetrotters that night, so we got to move way up near the court and laughed and laughed at their basketball antics. We got home very late that night, but did not have to use the blankets and snow shovel after all. It was a great day. One of the best things about trips like that with my dad was that I knew I belonged. I knew I was his son, and it felt good to be with him.

We all have the need to belong, and this goes all the way back to our infancy. Nellie Shani writes about this need to belong:

“Every child born into this world, needs the assurance that he belongs to a family who wants and loves him or her. It is believed that during the first year of our lives the need to belong is very dominant. God has intended that parents play the role of providing this need to belong and to feel loved. If for whatever reason our parents failed to minister to the need to belong, as we become adults, certain social and behavioral problems may start to manifest in our lives. This deprivation may cause some ‘cracks’ to start showing in the very foundation of our existence... A child whose basic need to belong has not been properly met will more often than not develop anxiety and sometimes even an inability to trust –even God.”

The need to belong lasts our entire life, from infancy to death. At each stage of our lives and in every area of our lives we have at least some need to belong. Think back to preschool or grade school or middle school or high school or college. Think about the teacher or classmate or teammate who helped you feel like you belonged, and the enormous difference that made for you. Think about the first day at your new job, and the person who welcomed you in and made you feel like you belonged there. Think about times when you did *not* have someone like that there for you, when you felt like the outsider, like you did not belong. That is a very difficult place to be. Some of you may be in that place in one way or another in your life right now.

People will do crazy things in order to feel accepted. On sports teams or in fraternities and sororities or other organizations people often have to endure hazing in order to belong—sometimes it can be funny, at other times it is demeaning and humiliating. People are often willing to pay a high price to feel like they belong—from buying things they cannot afford to paying an even higher price by risking their reputation or surrendering their chastity or doing any number of things they will live to regret.

I recently read Flanner O’Connor’s second and final novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. It’s quite dark, not exactly the “feel good family hit of the summer” ☺, but as with all her stories, quite powerful. Listen to how she describes the hunger one of the characters was experiencing:

“His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied... He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. He felt it rising in himself through time and darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth. He felt it building from the blood of Abel to his own, rising and engulfing him.”

That’s what our hunger to belong is like. It rises from deep within and engulfs us. People who do not feel like they belong are also prone to loneliness, which can feel like a prison. As Don Henley, the drummer of one of the greatest rock bands of the 70’s, The Eagles, sang in their hit, *Desperado*, “Your prison is walking through this world all alone”—or as The Beatles ask in *Eleanor Rigby*: “All the lonely people—where do they all belong?”

The good news of the gospel is that we belong to Christ, as Paul writes in today’s passage from his Letter to the Galatians, “you belong to Christ.”

Jesus came to seek and minister to those who feel like they don’t belong. We see this over and over again in the Scriptures. Jesus sought and ministered to the leper who had to live outside of town and cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” to those who passed by. Jesus sought out and ministered to the tax collector, who collected money for the hated Roman authorities and had a reputation for taking advantage of people and lining his pockets with their hard-earned money. Jesus sought out and ministered to the woman at the well, who had a scandalous reputation and therefore went to the well alone in the middle of the day instead of the morning and evening like all the other women in town. Jesus sought out and ministered to the woman caught in adultery, who the religious leaders wanted to stone to death. Jesus sought out and ministered the blind man, who had been blind for thirty-eight years and spent his days begging on the roadside. Jesus sought out and ministered to the demon-possessed, who had no self-control because they were controlled by an evil power beyond themselves. Jesus sought out those who felt like they did not belong.

And it went the other way too: those who felt like they did not belong sought Jesus. A Pharisee with questions sought Jesus at night because he didn’t want his fellow

Pharisees to know what he was doing. A woman with a bad reputation sought Jesus and wept at his feet. A respected man whose daughter had just died sought Jesus because he was desperate for help. A group of friends sought Jesus and tore a hole in the roof of the house where he was and lowered their paralyzed friend to him. People who did not feel like they belonged sought Jesus because they could sense his compassion, because they could tell that he really cared, because he made them feel perhaps for the first time in their lives like they belonged. People sought Jesus because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, made them feel like they belonged.

What about you? Maybe around your parents make you feel like you belong. Maybe you don't. Maybe around your spouse you feel like you belong, or maybe you feel tolerated instead. Maybe you're single and have a deep longing in your heart for someone to whom you can belong, or maybe you're divorced and a bit cynical about it. Maybe you're a student who at times feels completely on the outside at school. Maybe you're the one kid in the neighborhood who was not invited to the birthday party. Maybe you only wish you were in the "in crowd" and are tired of always being on the outside looking in.

The good news is that Jesus sought all of us. The good news is we belong to Him. The Scripture tells us that Jesus bought us with the blood he shed on the cross, as Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Do you not know... that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price" (6:19-20); and as Peter wrote in his first letter: "You know that you were ransomed... not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (1:18-19).

Moreover, because of Jesus' death on the cross, all of us can be assured that we belong to Christ, regardless of ethnic background, social status, or gender. Paul writes in today's passage, "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."

Paul writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek." Paul is writing about Christians, some of whom had converted from Judaism and some who had not. There is no distinction in God's eyes. Believe it or not, there will be more than Episcopalians in heaven ☺. There will be Baptists and Methodists and non-denoms and

Presbyterians and Catholics and Lutherans and Pentecostals, as well as millions of Christians who don't even know these denominations exist. We all belong to Christ. The denomination or lack of denomination to which we belong has no bearing on the fact that all believers belong to Christ.

Neither does the color of our skin. It has been noted that Sunday mornings are the most segregated time of the week in our country. My wife, Steph, and I attended Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and one of my favorite memories was worshipping at the weekly chapel services with many African-Americans as well as many students from around the world. We all belonged to Christ, regardless of the color of our skin, and the worship was filled with joy.

Paul also writes, "There is no longer slave or free." Social status also has no bearing on the fact that all believers belong to Christ. In the early church in the Roman Empire wealthy slave-owners worshipped alongside slaves. The vast difference in their social status did not matter. In God's eyes, believers belong to him regardless of their social status, regardless of which part of town they live, regardless of which schools their kids attend or what kind of car they drive or which oval-shaped beach bumper sticker is on the back of their car or whether they can even afford to visit a beach. We belong to Christ regardless of our social status.

Paul continues, "There is no longer male and female." In God's eyes women are not inferior to men. In many parts of the world and unfortunately in some parts of the church women are not treated fairly because of their gender. I've had conversations with women who left the church because they had had enough of this. When women in the church are kept in a box, it hurts them and does absolutely nothing to spread the gospel or glorify God. According to today's passage women belong to Christ every bit as much as men and when it comes to being justified by faith "there is no longer male and female."

These differences among people in our world that are often used to make people feel like they do not belong—differences in ethnic background or social status or gender—are eliminated for believers. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female." All who put their faith in Jesus Christ are forgiven, all who put their faith in Christ belong to him.

In the church there are three concepts that we often get out of order: behave, believe, and belong. People think that if they behave the right way and believe the right things, then maybe, just maybe, they can belong to the church. But the good news of the Gospel is that God treated us like we belonged to him before we ever believed and before our behavior ever got better. In fact, Scripture tells us that while we still sinners Christ died for us. When people awaken to the reality of the Gospel, the reality that we are fully known and fully loved by God, the reality that we belong to him, eventually our beliefs and behavior tend to be impacted, but it starts with knowing that we belong to Christ.

So be encouraged today. If in some way or another in your life you feel like you don't belong, if there are certain relationships in your life in which feel like you don't belong, tolerated but not loved, if you feel like an outsider, if you feel like because of your ethnic background or the color of your skin or your social status or your gender that you do not belong, the good news of the gospel is that *you do belong*. You belong to Christ, who created the world and yet was rejected by the very ones he created. You belong to Christ who bought you with the blood he shed on the cross. You belong to Christ and therefore to God, our Heavenly Father, to whom we give thanks and praise every day, not just Father's Day.

You belong to Christ who one day will return to gather together all who are justified by faith in him—the living and the dead, from every tribe and nation, from every ethnic background, with every color of skin—all gathered together at the great banquet table in heaven where everyone will feel at home, everyone will feel welcome, and everyone will forever know they belong.

Amen.