

## **“Separated” (Galatians 1:15-16)**

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The Text: <sup>15</sup>“But when he who had [separated me] before I was born, and who called me by his grace, <sup>16</sup>was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen. We began our series on the book of Galatians last Sunday with the very practical mission of our Lord Jesus Christ: He came to rescue you dear Christian from the present evil age (Galatians 1:3). This is the perfect segue for today’s continuation of the Galatians’ series: the Holy Spirit through Paul in Galatians teaches us about one of the most predominant principles of life in the universe: *separation*. In saving you, God separates you from evil, but there is much more to be said about separation.

To live is to experience separation. It is an axiomatic principle of existence. *“Cell division [or separation] is necessary for the growth and repair of multicellular organisms and for the reproduction of all organisms (Mader, Inquiry Into Life, third edition, 76).”* And what is true at the cellular level is true of the cosmos: *“The discovery of the expansion of the universe was one of the great intellectual revolutions of the twentieth century. It came as a total surprise, and it completely changed the discussion of the origin of the universe. If the galaxies are moving apart, they must have been closer together in the past (Hawking, The Illustrated A Brief History of Time [and] The Universe In A Nutshell, 76).”* That is through the constant expansion of the universe separation between the stars and between the galaxies is the natural contour of the physical cosmos. Separation is normal and it is necessary.

Between our chemistry and the cosmos, however, are our daily lives and the separation we experience represents both order for our lives and hardship (depending on the particular type of separation we experience). We desire separation when it comes to our capitalistic system which rewards hard work, education, and ingenuity. All men are created equal (this is true), but God rewards those who work. The Bible says simply in 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 3:10: *“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”*

At the same time, we bemoan the separation that springs from materialism, greed, and hedonism which can blind people -- who have much -- to ignore those who are poor and who are suffering. Our country specializes in separation: it is both the key to our success and at the same time the revelation of our shame.

But we also deal with separation in our immediate lives. Disease is the experience of the disorder that has entered our lives. When our bodies are impacted by any kind of malady (be it a virus, an injury, or an addiction) we experience separation from a fuller state of health. This is

a distraction to say the least and in some cases the cause for a total shift in the way we live. It is normal in these circumstances to experience bereavement, sorrow, and/or confusion when we are separated from the health and vitality we once knew.

But life is also full of exciting forms of separation. Separation from middle school onto high school is exciting; separation from high school to college is even more exciting. This is a time of many celebrations as we have so many graduates who are separating from one stage of life to another: Hope Taylor is separating from Lutheran High Orange and going to college in Nebraska; Daniel Kuntz is separating from Crean Lutheran High School and going to college in Washington state; and Jacob Mueller is separating from El Toro High School and will be attending college here in Irvine. My daughter Danielle separates from the University of Chicago on August 30<sup>th</sup> and will then separate from her status of “being single” to the status of being married on September 14<sup>th</sup>. She will then also separate from the United States in order to live in Germany...a separation that is for me both exciting and bittersweet. Nikki Atanasova who just separated from her under graduate studies at CUI will start in the nursing program at CUI. Stacy Fischer is now separated from her program at USC and will become a Lutheran teacher in San Diego. Nickolas Lewis has achieved his law degree from Chapman University and now separates from law school in order to pass the bar and start an exciting career as *juris doctor (joining the other JD's in our congregation)*. Indeed, separation is often also the cause for celebration! For myself, 22 years ago today, I was separated for service in the holy ministry through holy ordination. And 14 years ago, my daughter Esbeydi was separated from life in the womb, to life in the world. Happy birthday Esbeydi!

This diversity on separation is also powerfully represented in Holy Scripture. Saint Paul writes at Galatians 1:15-16: <sup>15</sup>*But when he who had [SEPARATED/[original form: aphorizo] me before I was born, and who called me by his grace, <sup>16</sup>was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...*

This word is important. *Aphorizo* in the Greek is a compound word from *apo* = *away from, separate, at the farthest point* + *horos* = *boundary*. It means “to mark off from a boundary or line (Robinson, *Word Pictures In The New Testament*, 279).” Kittel says simply that we can think of the concept as “to sever (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume, 728).” God separates and for very important reasons, sometimes for blessing and other times for judgment. On the last day when Jesus comes in glory, He will separate all people one from another “*as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32)*.” The angels themselves will conduct this separation -- at the Lord’s bidding -- of the evil from the righteous (Matthew 13:49).

Michelangelo’s Sistine masterpiece entitled “The Last Judgment” is a depiction of this real separation of human beings demonstrating that Holy Scripture absolutely rejects the idea

of universalism (that all people are universally saved regardless of their belief or lack thereof). God, however, will in fact separate some people to be united *with* God for eternity (thus separated from hell) and other people will be separated *from* God for eternity (thus separated from heaven).

And in our sin we realize that by ourselves we stand in the category of separation from God. Oh we try to fight against this, but to no avail. We do not want to admit it, but often as we fight against what we know is destroying us (our sinful behavior), the harder we fight against God and the more we realize we are infiltrated by sin. This is a common experience. Luther said, "And the holier we were [describing his efforts among the monks to be holy] the more blinded we were, and the more sincerely we worshipped the devil (Luther's Works 26, 71)." That is, Luther's efforts to be pure, led him to see that he could not make himself pure, but since that was the only religion he knew he remained in that system and in doing so was denying the work that only God could accomplish. That is why he said he was worshipping the devil, because he was blinded to the Gospel.

This is our problem: we try to separate ourselves from sin. We insist that religion is defined by what we do. And so when we fail, we reason that we have no choice but to go along with our sin and rebellion against God. How many people have ignorantly been destroyed by sin on account of the devil's deception that "that is just the way you are, so there is no hope."?! This is a lie and a denial of Scripture. God does not call you and me to pull ourselves up from our bootstraps. He does not call you to save yourself. He does not call you to separate from sin by yourself. You can't.

To illustrate this truth we have the testimony of Saint Paul. It was God -- and God alone in His grace (His free gift of love and mercy in Jesus) -- that separated Saint Paul from his terrible sin.

It is as if Saint Paul was saying, *"Every gift – whether great or small, whether physical or spiritual – that God intended to give to me, and all the good things that I was ever to do at any time in all my life – all this God had predestined even before I was born, when I could not think, wish, or do anything good but was a shapeless embryo. Therefore this gift came to me by the mere predestination and merciful grace of God even before I was born. And then, after I was born, He still supported me, even though I was covered with innumerable and horrible iniquities and evils. To declare the unspeakable and inestimable greatness of His mercy to me even more obviously, He forgave my infinite and horrible sins by His sheer grace. So generously did He shower me with His grace that I not only knew what is given to us in Christ but also preached this to others (LW 26, 71-72)."*

But how does this divine separation from sin and death take place? How can you be rescued from your separation from God? If there is nothing you can do about your sinful heart, then how can you ever be separated from condemnation? The answer is also in Galatians 1:15: God who separated Paul “called [him] by his grace.” The ancient father Victorinus wrote simply, *“For no one knows God except one who has been called (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, VIII, 11).”*

From disorder, sin, chaos, darkness and hopelessness, God called and He calls today. Irenaeus explained, *“[Paul’s] former ignorance [was] driven out by his subsequent knowledge: just as the blind men whom the Lord healed did certainly lose their blindness...the darkness being merely driven away...For the Maker of all things, the Word of God, who did also from the beginning form man, when He found His handiwork impaired by wickedness, performed upon it all kinds of healing (Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1, 539).”* And this healing in your life, dear Christian, has come because God has called you by His Word!

In Jesus who gave His life for you, God is the One who is actively working upon you to turn your separation from God to separation from sin and healing in your life. This is true even for your daily battle against sin. *“Thus in the lapses of the saints into sin and in their repentance there is set before us the grace of God in order that we may regard it in our weaknesses (Gal. 1:13-15; 1 Tim. 1:13-16; Matt. 26:69-75; Ps. 51:1-12) (Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, Part III, 362).”*

In other words, when your conscience strikes hard dear Christian and accuses you of your utter failure, then remember that our Lord is the Lord who had mercy on us even before we were born and who in His blood that would be shed on the cross of Calvary for our sins, separated us from eternity from the accusations of the law and even our own hearts.

But how do you know this is true for you? Saint Paul was seemingly extraordinarily blessed by his dramatic conversion experience in seeing the risen Lord on the Damascus road. What about you? The answer is that to hear and receive the Word of Christ from the apostolic witness is to hear and receive from the Lord Jesus Christ himself (Mt. 10:40, Lk. 10:16, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, 487). You know that you are elected in Christ, because you were called by Christ in His Word. In your baptism you were called. In Holy Communion on this day, you are called.

Think of it this way: there is no doubt that there is One person – again, beyond a shadow of a doubt – that is absolutely separated from sin and condemnation; Who is holy and sacred; Who has life and power, and that One person is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Well then here is the Good News: this Savior identifies Himself with His body the Church. The Church is the very body of Christ. And because Jesus is called the Holy One of God, then you are in Christ

– who are members of His body the Church – are also called holy and separate from all darkness and all hopelessness!

Because Jesus is separated to bring all salvation and hope to those who belong to Him, then you – a member of His body – are in and with Him. He is called, so you are called. He is holy, so you are holy. He is separate in glory, so you are separate in glory. All who are in Him are therefore the object of divine election [separation for eternal blessing] (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.2, 430) and God has elected you; you know because God has called you by the Word that even now enters your hearts and minds. He is calling you now and it is call that does not need your strength. It is call that does not need your effort, because it is so powerful that it was effective even before you were born!

In Christ, you are absolutely separated from a life of no hope. In Christ, you are absolutely separated to be with God and to be full of hope!

So come Christians and let Christ work on you and in you. Leave behind your efforts to fix yourself and come to receive His good work of separation for you. Come up here to receive His body which will separate you from death to life; come up here to receive His blood which will separate you from no faith to a living faith and then let Him work in you. Let Him do for you what you could never do for yourselves: separate you for blessing as one called by His grace!

And as we rely on His powerful call that separates into the Kingdom of God, let us now -- by His call, by His Word, by His grace, and by His Spirit -- live for Him. Let us be separate from the world as we defend and are faithful to our marriages; as we defend and are faithful to our children; as we defend and are faithful in the way of faith and love. Let us live out our separation and turn from the sin that is in the world and share the salt and light of God's Word and God's life of love. Let us live as separated people; separated in Christ and separated to be a blessing that we as Christ's body may preach the Gospel in Word and deed! In this way it is good to be separated!