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Illegitimate Children – Who Belongs to the True Church (and who does not)?
August 20, 2023

Sermon Text: Galatians 4:21-31

Scripture Reading: Galatians 4:21-31

1Co 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

Last time, you will recall, we considered the question – *what does the true church look like?* One answer is given by the Apostle Paul – it is a place where the true Word of God is proclaimed and believed, and it is NOT a place where the people are actually putting their

faith in a man instead of in Christ. Cleverness of speech, superiority and teaching the wisdom of man instead of the truth of Christ.

Here is an excellent insight I came across this week. It comes from a pastor named David Orrison in his book, *Narcissism in the Church*. [A Narcissist is a person who has a profound mindset of entitlement, of superiority, who is characterized by a lack of empathy, devoid of love, who uses people to feed his need for a constant supply of praise in order to promote the fictional character he claims to be]. Here is the insight:

“The narcissistic leader personifies what many people think they need in their lives. He can make decisions without hesitation. He can meet objections and win. For frightened parents, wearied church

workers and suffering victims, the promise and evidence of success surmount many of life's normal cautions. Remaining separate from the people while controlling them, fits well in the narcissistic pattern. While Christ showed His greatness by washing feet and caring for the needy, the narcissist leader becomes great by virtue of his position. While Jesus established a close and loving relationship with the people He met, the narcissist leader distances himself from the people in order to cultivate that sense of superiority.

The narcissist must remain separate from the people. The closer the relationship is, the less the narcissist can cover his disdain for the people and the weakness he feels with intimacy."

Evil is incredibly deceptive. We must be on guard and always ask the Lord to "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." When a Diotrephes comes on the scene we will be tempted to see him or her as someone who personifies what we think we need.

This, no doubt will be a prime reason why the Antichrist will come to worldwide power one day. All the people will worship him. Here is the one with all the answers to all of our problems.

How can we discern who truly belongs to the true church? How can we sort out the narcissist, the Diotrephes, the counterfeits, the servants of Satan who try to creep in among us? To answer that question, John Calvin looked at the 4th chapter of Galatians, part of which we have just read. In particular, he focused on this:

Gal 4:26-31 But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. (27) For it is written, "REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND." (28) And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. **(29) But as at that time he who was born**

according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. (30)

But what does the Scripture say? "CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN." (31) So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

The churches of Galatia had BIG problems. People had crept in among them preaching a false gospel which added man's works – specifically the keeping of various ceremonial laws – to faith. Christ was not enough, in other words. And the people fell for it. Paul tells them he is blown away at how quickly they deserted Christ for a false gospel. He told them that these phonies were under God's curse and that they were incredibly foolish for going astray from Christ.

In the course of his argument, Paul pointed to this Old Testament account:

Gen 21:8-21 The child [Isaac] grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. (9) Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian [Ishmael], whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. (10) Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac."

(11) The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. (12) But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, **for through Isaac your descendants shall be named.** (13) "And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant."

(14) So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and

gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.

Isaac, you recall, was *the son of promise*. While Ishmael was a product of Abraham's flesh, Isaac was the result of God fulfilling His promise to Abraham to raise up a Seed and make him a great nation. Isaac was (since Abraham and Sarah were waaaay past the years of childbearing) *the promise of God fulfilled*. He was the Lord's doing. And it would be through Isaac that the Seed, the Messiah would come. Not through Ishmael, but through Isaac.

Ishamel was like Formalist and Hypocrisy in Pilgrim's Progress-

And as he was troubled thereabout, he spied two men come tumbling over the wall on the left hand of the narrow way; and they made up apace to him. The name of the one was Formalist, and the name of the other Hypocrisy. So, as I said, they drew up unto him, who thus entered with them into discourse.

CHR. Gentlemen, whence came you, and whither go you? FORM. and HYP. We were born in the land of Vain-glory, and are going for praise to Mount Zion.

CHR. Why came you not in at the gate which stands at the beginning of the way? Know you not that it is written, that he that coms not in by the door, "but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber?" [John 10:1]

FORM. and HYP. They said, That to go to the gate for entrance was, by all their countrymen, counted too far about; and that, therefore, their usual way was to make a short cut of it, and to climb over the wall, as they had done.

CHR. But will it not be counted a trespass against the Lord of the city where we are bound, thus to violate his revealed will?

FORM. and HYP. They told him, that, as for that, he needed not to trouble his head thereabout; for what they did they had custom for; and could produce, if need were, testimony that would witness it for more than a thousand years. [John

Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress,
Kindle Edition

In other words, as Bunyan is illustrating here for us, *there are many people who are in the visible church, who claim to be pilgrims (ie, Christians) who are illegitimate* members. They are not children of God. They are not products of His Promised Seed, they did not enter by Christ who is the gate and the only true entrance to the body of Christ.

And we are told this repeatedly in the Scriptures:

Rom 2:28-29 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. (29) But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

How then do we discern? John tells us in his first epistle that there are a number of tests:

- If a man says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar
- If a person denies the deity of Christ he is of the antichrist
- The person who continues to walk in sin as the course of their life is not born of God

But the Apostle Paul points us to still another test here in Galatians 4 as it is evidenced in Ishmael's mocking of the son of promise:

(29) But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.

We saw this morning that many people who claim to be believers and to be associated with the name of God are, nevertheless, illegitimate children. For this reason God, disowns them, though they may be considered 'Christians' in the eyes of the world. They have corrupted that good seed, which is pure doctrine, which they need in order to be regenerated and adopted into God's family. What good is it to be

regarded as part of the church if we are not truly born of the good seed which is both pure and perfect? [John Calvin, Sermons on Galatians]

The word “church” is so often misused today – and we must be certain that we use it correctly. The Roman Pope claims his “church” is the church when in fact it is an illegitimate counterfeit. The true Church is the creation of God consisting of all true believers, people born of God by the Spirit, people who truly are joined to Christ. The same is true of the title “Christian.” A Christian, in truth, is not merely a person who claims to be a Christian and thus is only a product of the flesh, of his own doing. No. A Christian is a person who is one of God’s elect, who has been born again, made a new creation in Christ.

“We can only enter the household of God through this one door, that is, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” [Ibid]

Ishamel did not become a true child of Abraham, a son of the Promise, by the efforts of Abraham and Hagar. He was a product of the flesh. And how then did this counterfeit reveal itself? *“But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.”*

There is, according to the Apostle Paul’s words here, a Jerusalem which is here on this earth, and a Jerusalem which is from above. That is to say, there is a true church created by God through the Promise, through the Promised Seed, that is, through the Lord Jesus Christ. And then there is a false church which is a product of the flesh. Just as the Jews in Paul’s day claimed they were the true church centered in Jerusalem, so it is now. There is a false church – which is a product of man – and there is the true church – which is God’s creation in Christ.

Now, to let Calvin explain it once more:

“Just as the son of the flesh persecuted the son of the Promise, so it is now. It is inevitable that we [true believers] will be so treated. Hypocrites and liars, illegitimate children who have defiled the truth, will gloat over us. They will exalt themselves against us, as if we were unworthy to even kiss their feet. [Ibid]

Here, for example, is the Pope on his throne in all of his earthly splendor. He claims to be Christ on earth, the head of the true church – yet such people (and there are many) are in fact, *Ishmaelites*. They are false brethren. They are Formalist and Hypocrisy. They have climbed in over the wall. They did not come in through the only authorized Door which is Christ. *And these counterfeits will always mock the true children of God.* They will persecute the real church. As Calvin puts it bluntly –

“They are bastard children despite what they claim about their seniority” [ie, their ancient roots] The Pope and his kind *“are a band of Ishmaelites and evil, illegitimate*

children who fight against God and all of His true offspring.”

Ishmael was, humanly speaking, the firstborn of Abraham, being born some 16 years or so before Isaac. But mere seniority of years does not warrant someone to be an heir in God’s kingdom. No. There are many grey-headed Ishmaelites within the visible church – and they have no part in Christ.

Ishmaelites commonly boast of their greatness and of the marvelous works they have done in the Lord’s name. But this is nothing more than the boasting of Ishmael.

Ishmaelites not only mock the true children and heirs of God, but their mocking is actually a mocking of God and of the gospel of Christ. Ishmael mocked Isaac and in doing so was mocking the Promise given to Abraham by the Lord. Ishmael knew very well that Isaac was the son of Promise because he knew that Isaac’s birth was a miracle effected by the Lord. Ishmael KNEW this – and yet he mocked.

He would not be part of the true Israelites, and he was cast out.

Now, consider this further:

Gal 4:24-26 This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. (25) Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. (26) But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.

The Law of God was given to Israel at Mount Sinai as a covenant. If they obeyed the terms, they would be blessed. If they disobeyed, they would be cursed, and we all know what the outcome was. Man in his sin will never be able to obey the Law of God. The Law was good and righteous, proceeding from God's own holy character. The problem is man. The problem is sin.

That old covenant people, that old covenant "church," you might say – was in bondage. Slavery to sin and the devil reigned. Hagar and Ishmael are pictures or types of that Old Covenant because the only children produced by slaves are slaves! Hagar was a slave, her son Ishmael was a slave. He had not rights as an heir even though he was Abraham's firstborn. Because he was the product of the flesh, not of the Promise.

The Jews in Paul's day, centered at Jerusalem, were still slaves. Paul is telling the Galatians here that their rejection of Christ alone by faith alone left them in bondage. The Jews were slaves. The earthly Jerusalem was an illegitimate church filled with illegitimate children.

In contrast, says Paul, there is another Jerusalem – one that is from above. One that is God's own making. One that produces children who are sons and heirs. Children who are free.

You see it? *There are TWO churches* – one is earthly. The other

is heavenly. One is of the flesh in bondage to the Law. The other is from above, by the Spirit, whose children are free.

And what is always, always, always true of the earthly Jerusalem? Its children mock and persecute the children of the heavenly Jerusalem. So it is today.

Think about this carefully. Why does this monstrous entity called the Roman Catholic “church” have such murderous animosity toward real Christians? Why wouldn’t one “church” be an ally of another, in spite of some doctrinal differences? Why has Rome persecuted and murdered so many Christians down through the centuries? *Because Rome is part of the earthly Jerusalem. Rome is Hagar and Ishmael. Rome is Formalist and Hypocrisy who has climbed into the church without coming in at the only true gate – Jesus Christ.*

Now, this warfare is not only between Rome and the Protestant church (understand that much of the Protestant “church” is also just

the Jerusalem below, filled with Ishmaelites). This warfare reigns wherever the children of the flesh come into contact with the children of the Promise.

1Jn 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.

The Christian faith then is marked by what we could call the war between two cities. One city claims to be of God, but is not. It is an illegitimate counterfeit. The other is the true Jerusalem, the real City of God.

“Take note of what Paul is telling us here. For the ill-treatment of Isaac by Ishmael was not just a one time occurrence. We see the same thing happening today. The children of God will be oppressed and trodden underfoot by those who, in theory, are the first-born, and many simple souls will be seduced by this very claim of theirs. Let us prepare ourselves for

battle, says Paul, and not allow our faith to be overcome by the pride of those who are the enemies of the truth of God. *These are domestic enemies, not like the pagans, but those who are garrisoned within the church, even clergy or great leaders. If we have been born again through the pure seed with which God is pleased, this alone makes us rightful children and heirs of the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus Christ was promised through Isaac, and thus, this was a promise of salvation. By mocking, Ishmael was giving a mortal wound to the children of adoption and to all believers, by disdain and attacking their source of highest good and eternal happiness. There are many hypocrites, seeking to destroy, as far as they possibly can, the doctrine of grace which is offered to them by the Lord Jesus Christ. They would rob Him of His dignity and worth, rather than magnifying the wonderful generosity of God, the source of our souls' well-being.

Let us be ready then, to fight these battles with our internal foes, who

claim to be children of God. They say they are our superiors and boast of their seniority, hoping it will make us feel crushed and beaten.

Notice what Paul says in conclusion, that all those who boast in this way that they belong to the church today and claim the rights of the firstborn will be cast out as bastard children. Do not be deceived by their splendor which so often surrounds Ishmaelites – their tyranny is maintained by force, by persecution, by gloating and the like. Consider their end.

Just as Ishmael persecuted the son of Promise, so it remains to this day. This is a chief way to know who truly belongs to the true church, and who does not. [Ibid]

The Apostle Paul knew this all too well from his own life. This Apostle of Christ was once Saul of Tarsus, a true Ishmaelite and member of the earthly Jerusalem. He was in bondage. He was a slave. He was not born again. He savaged the true church. He fought against Christ – until that fateful day on the

road to Damascus. On that Day Paul became a member of the true Jerusalem. He ceased persecuting the children of the Promise. He loved them, He loved Jesus Christ, and he very quickly experienced the wrath of the Ishmaelites of earthly Jerusalem.

Do not be surprised, Christian, when the same happens to you.