

But HOW Do We Play

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[0 : 0 0] that let's talk about identity. We've been in the middle of a series called Everybody Gets to Play. We've bounced around through the book of Luke, the book of Acts, and now we're in the book of Galatians, which is this letter written by Paul to the church of Galatia. And we're going to be in Galatians chapter 3 if you have a Bible or a phone or some such wonderful technological device. And we're going to be continuing on in this idea of who gets to play and how do we get to play. But before we do that, I got a couple of images I want to throw on the screen at you. Number one is when you see this, what is this? Who does it represent? Anonymous. Anonymous. And how do you know?

Because of the mask, right? You see the mask, you know, oh, this is the anarchist hacking group, Anonymous. Next slide. Indiana Jones. Exactly. And how do you know? What gives it away?

You got the fedora. You've got the whip. Next one. Awkward, awkward giggles. What is this? MAGA. Yeah, it's a Make America Great Again hat. And you don't even need to put the words on. The color, the shape, the style is enough to tell you. Now, throughout any culture, there are these things called identity boundary markers. Welcome back to Sociology 101. There are these things called identity boundary markers, which let the world know what kind of person, what kind of identity, what kind of group you may be a part of. And there can be physical ones. Like, you put a stethoscope around a person, you put them on TV, and you know they are a doctor. That's right. A calendar. You know, there's the old joke about like a kid asking their parent, like, is there July 4th in Canada? Yes. They just don't blow up fireworks because of it. That's a United States thing, right? So you've got physical boundary markers, calendar boundary markers, dietary boundary markers of, you know, that certain people who don't eat, you know, pork, or certain people who don't eat meat, or cows, or things like that, that will tell you about maybe the kinds of groups that they are a part of. These external things that help you know, oh, you're part of this group, but not that group, and some such thing. Now, the Jews, which is, you know, where we find people like Jesus and Paul and the authors of the Bible, they also had these identity boundary markers. There were physical ones, like circumcision, which was this male-only identity marker about what you looked like physically, and this was a much more knowable thing back then, because you would have public baths and gymnasiums where nakedness would be, you know, a thing where you could see very clearly, oh, you're a circumcised person, you must be one of those Jews. There was calendar things, like festivals and feasts and pilgrimages when you went to the temple, or you would be that known as this lazy person, some would say, that you took a whole day off on Saturday, Friday,

Sunday sundown to Saturday sundown called Sabbath. You must be one of those lazy Jews. This is what the Greeks and the Romans would say about the Jews, and there were the dietary restrictions of you didn't eat pork, and you didn't eat shrimp, and you didn't eat lobster, and you would gather around a meal, and people would say, like, where did you get your food, and what are you eating, and why aren't you eating that? Oh, you must be one of these kinds of people. Now, there was a name for this set of identity boundary markers that's in our New Testament, and it's called the works of the law. The works of the law was a technical vocabulary term for the Jewish identity boundary markers, and the reason I'm beginning this as an intro for our talk tonight is that this phrase has caused centuries of confusion for New Testament readers, particularly reading through the book of Galatians. What happened is that you had a guy named Martin Luther who way back in the 14 and 1500s started this thing called the Protestant Reformation, and he saw Paul talk about the works of the law, and he made this stereotype that the Jews were a works-based religion, but the Christians were a grace-based religion, and this was just that, a stereotype. It wasn't true. The works of the law were not about how we earned God's favor, but rather the works of the law were about how could we tell each other apart from the rest of the world. That's what the works of the law were. It was not that the Jews were only about works, and Christians were only about grace. Christians saw themselves as the natural conclusion of the Jewish faith, and the Jewish faith had always been about grace. When God went to

Abraham, God said, I, in Genesis 12, God said, I'm going to make you a great nation, and I'm going to bless you, and from you bless all of the nations, bless the entire world. God did not go to Abraham and said, hey, if you obey these laws and rules, then I might like you. That was not it at all. Look, turn to the book of Exodus. God goes to the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham. God goes to them and rescues them, redeems them, delivers them from slavery, and then out of that relationship of covenant love, then the people have this understanding of, okay, if God is going to love us unconditionally, no matter what, based entirely off of grace, how then will we live? That was the question.

[5 : 36] So it was not works versus grace, Jewish versus Christian. Rather, what Christians dared to believe is that Jesus was the climax of the covenant, the conclusion of the story, that he was the Jewish Messiah who was enthroned on David's throne to become king of not only Israel, but the world.

That's what the Christians dared to believe, and the Jews, not so much. And again, it wasn't about works versus grace is about the law being set aside and that not being necessary anymore. So that's some background to what we're going to talk about today. Now, there are two main questions for Christians, for any sort of community, and those questions are, number one, how can we be part of the family? Number two, how does the family treat each other? Who can be part of the family? Who's in, who's out? Those sort of boundary line conversations. And question number two, how does the family treat each other? Are we treating each other with fairness and kindness or with prejudice and anger? These are two questions that we ask constantly and continually, and each generation of Christians and the church is always wrestling with these questions anew. Who can be part, and how do we treat one another? Now, before we get to our scripture, let me ask you a question. So again, we talked about this last week a little bit. We're all used to like double screening it now, so we're going to double screen in real life. If you're watching the live stream, feel free to get a second device. Go to slido.com, slido.com, and you can put in the keyword table church, and we've got a question to put up there. And the question is this, what funny rules did your family have growing up? What funny rules did your family have growing up? Now, we had, we, I was the youngest of six siblings. My parents fostered something like 40 foster kids over 10 years. And so with that amount of chaos in the home, we needed lots of rules. Like every light that was left on was a quarter, quarter. And every sock that was left rolled up in the laundry was another quarter. There were a lot of quarters involved. There's a quarter-based currency at our house. We had lots of rules about like if you, if you wanted a soda, there was, there was another quarter. If there was like any sort of one time there was a kid who would always pass gas at the table. And so one of the rules was if you pass gas at the table, you had to go into the bathroom where dad had just gone to the bathroom and sit and wait there and smell the stink. That was one of the rules. Okay. So here we go. Here are some of the rules. No elbows on the table. I never understood that one. You had to have a Bible reading after dinner before we could leave. Oof, nothing inspires a love for scripture like rules about it. We couldn't watch Kids Incorporated because they danced. Or you could watch Mickey Mouse Club. Why the difference?

Why the difference? Okay. Always yes ma'am and yes sir. No yeah. No closed doors in the house. Yeah, I don't want to make out with anybody. Don't open the garage door if the air conditioning is on.

That's a new one. Okay. No drinking and driving. That's not a funny rule. That's a good one. One penny per weed picked. Oh yeah. No shaking your leg. My dad had a thing about shaking your leg.

Yeah, if we had a hat on at the table, you were allowed to flip it off at someone's head. Calling shotgun is law. Yeah, there's always the shotgun system where everybody has their own rules. You can watch Dragon Tales because of magic. No cursing. You can only have sugar cereal on your birthday. Yeah, sorry. I have that rule too. Water savings. It is yellow. It is brown. Let it go down. No dishwasher allowed. Like it wasn't that you couldn't afford a dishwasher. It was just no dishwasher allowed. Yeah, you gotta have the elbow grease. Good, good. So we all have these like family rules. And then like if you've ever had like a friend come over or partner or something like that, then you like enter into the house and was there ever like the speech before you get through the front door? Like, oh, by the way, don't forget. Take off your hat at the table or don't put your elbows down or you might get a dirty look. Like you've ever had those kinds of talks with friends or whatever. We all have those kinds of rules. Now, why do we have them? Well, some of them maybe had a practical reason. Some of them eventually just become part of the family DNA. It's just the way we've always done it. It's the way that we know, well, you must be a parrot because you are always asking us for quarters for things. Those kinds of things. All right. With that in mind, let's turn to the book of Galatians chapter 3. Paul is writing to this church. He's pretty upset with them. This is what he writes. He says, you foolish Galatians who has bewitched you before your very eyes.

[10 : 31] Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. The word used for clearly portrayed is a word for drawing as if Peter, or I'm sorry, when Paul had gone there and planted the church and like made a drawing of what happened to Jesus. I would like to learn just one thing from you. Did you receive the spirit by the, here's that phrase, works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish?

After beginning by the means of the spirit, are you now trying to finish by the means of the flesh? Have you experienced so much in vain if it really were in vain? So again, I ask, does God give you his spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law or by believing what you heard?

And so also Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Understand then, Paul writes, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. And then a couple more verses from chapter 5, just to round out our thought for tonight. Chapter 5 verse 1, it says, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. Rather, serve one another humbly in love, for the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command, love your neighbor as yourself.

All right, so three main points for tonight. Point number one, this is not about works versus grace. This is not about who's in and who's out or who gets saved. Is it by works or versus grace?

Rather, this is about how do we know who God's family is? What are the ways that we can tell that these are God's people? Is it going to be by the Spirit, by being Spirit kind of people who are walking and living by the Spirit, and that's the rest of Galatians 5? Or is it going to be by these external identity markers, by these, by circumcision and Sabbath and food laws? How are we going to be able to tell that these are God's people purely by external means or by something a little bit more complicated but more life-giving, and that's the Spirit. In the way of Jesus, we see that these works of the law, these three identity markers, find new fulfillment for the people of God. Circumcision is fulfilled by baptism. Circumcision was a male-only thing, and believe it or not, in Paul's ideas about what God's family looked like, what the church and what God's community was going to look like, it wasn't going to be only about the men anymore. It was going to be about everybody getting to be a part of this, and everybody getting to have these new ways of knowing who was part of God's family.

[13 : 37] And so circumcision was the sign of the covenant, this physical sign of what God was doing, and now that's replaced by baptism. That when we are sprinkled or dunked or immersed, we are put into the grave just like Jesus, and then raised again and filled with God's Spirit just like Jesus. The food laws are fulfilled by communion. The food laws were all about identifying what was it that could make us unclean, would make us ceremonially unpure. And now Paul says, no, that's not the case anymore. It's not about food laws, about what's clean and what's dirty. Rather, it's about when we gather together around a table and share a meal together, and there's bread, and there's drink, and there's laughter, then we are reminded that we're all part of the same body, the same family. It's not about being unclean and unpure. It's about sharing life together around a table. And then Sabbath was no longer just about one day a week where there were very strict rules about how much you could lift and how far you could walk, and if you were allowed to rescue your donkey or not. Rather, Sabbath was replaced by, and you see this in the book of Hebrews, communal, continual rest. That there was no more anxiety or worry about, do I need to make a sacrifice for this? Do I need to make amends with this? Do I need to be anxious about whether or not

God is angry with me? Rather, the book of Hebrews says that we enter into rest knowing that Jesus is constantly, continually, unfailingly mediating us, saving us, sanctifying us, making all of us holy and pure and sanctified. And so with that knowledge, we can joyfully say, I can rest.

I can be in God's presence and know that it is good, and God has nothing but affection for me. And so what Paul is so upset about in the book of Galatians is that when you've got these kinds of signs and symbols about being part of God's family, about being raised to new life through baptism, about sharing community over the table, over bread and wine, about entering into continual rest, Paul, of course, is upset of, well, why would you go back to the old way? Why would you go back to these old identity boundary markers that were going to exclude women, and that were going to exclude certain kinds of food and certain kinds of people, and that were going to be about just one day of rest in a constant anxiety the rest of the time? Don't finish by the flesh what God has started by the Spirit. That's what Paul is arguing for. So again, this isn't about works versus grace, because in the Jewish worldview, they did not do these things, circumcision and food law and Sabbath, in order to prove themselves before God. They did it so that they could know who around them was also part of God's community, God's people. Paul is saying, we don't need those external symbols anymore, because in Christ, everybody can get to play, everybody is justified, everybody is saved already. See Romans chapter 5.

Everybody is part of God's family, and now all we have to do is just fling the door open and invite them into the party. Point number two, righteousness, this very biblical word, is not about a store of moral credit. It's about being part of God's worldwide family. Now, if you did not grow up in the church with particularly churchy language, this point may not make a whole lot of sense. You may not care about it, but for people like me or for others here or watching that grew up in very churchy kind of language, you hear words like righteousness being branded about Jesus needing to die so that he could give us his righteousness so that when God looks at us, he doesn't see us, he sees Jesus instead.

That's the idea. And rather, we don't really see that in scripture. Jesus doesn't die to try to hold back a very angry father. Jesus, as we talked about last month, is God in the flesh. Jesus is showing us what God's love has always been like. And so righteousness isn't about Jesus needing to be abused by a cosmic parent in order for God to be able to forgive us. No, God has always been the forgiving sort.

[17 : 56] Rather, righteousness in Paul's mind is about being part of God's worldwide family. Righteousness is this word in the Greek that means covenant faithfulness, that the promises that God has made, God will always keep. Check out Galatians chapter 3 verse 7. It says, So Abraham believed God, had faith, put his trust in God, gave his allegiance to God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, as faithfulness. And then Paul explains what that righteousness is in the very next verse. Understand then that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Those who have faith, it's not like God is like, well, you had a bankrupt moral credit, so I'm going to give you a million moral points. No, no, no, no, no. Those who have faith are part of the family. They are part of God's covenant people, this worldwide community of grace. Jesus's death and resurrection subdued the forces of evil that separated humanity. And any attempt to re-erect those divisions, those walls, those signs and symbols that only divided people. For Paul, it was the same as denying Jesus's ministry.

Jesus's death and resurrection was not only about human divine reconciliation, about needing to placate some angry God. No, it was rather about God communicating how deep his love for us always had been.

And if groups of humans were not able to reconcile with one another, then the gospel for Paul was useless. It was pointless. For Paul, the way that we knew that Jesus's life and death and resurrection had any effect is when we saw groups of people who had previously been enemies stop being enemies and start calling each other friends and family. This was absolutely necessary for the way that Paul preached his gospel and for the way that Jesus did his ministry. And so any attempt to draw lines and say, you have to look, you have to act, you have to behave like us in order to belong, is the same as saying Jesus's life and death and resurrection aren't good enough.

Final point, number three. Everybody gets to play answers the who question. That's the name of our series. Everybody gets to play. Everybody gets to belong. Everybody is included.

We don't get to draw these big, thick, black dividing lines again. Rather, God has gotten rid of the walls of separation and is throwing the doors open for everybody to be included. But we still need to answer, how do we play? Yes, everybody gets to play. But how? Everybody can be invited into the family.

[20 : 54] But how do we treat one another? Look at Galatians 5 verse 13. It says, you, my brothers and sisters, my family, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. Rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command, love your neighbor as yourself. And so we've heard the invitation, everybody gets to play.

But now we bring the challenge, the part that makes us a little squirmy. How do we play? How do we get along? How does the family treat one another? Restricting who gets to play, restricting who gets to belong, who gets to be a part? That's injustice. Restricting the who is bigotry. It's discrimination.

It's saying these kinds of identities, we won't accept them. We won't allow them. They have to go somewhere else and be somewhere else because their identity is gross to us. We don't want to be a part of it. Imagine going and looking for friends and having this list, not of like how they're going to treat you, but rather what kind of people there are. Well, I'll accept like Americans, but not Canadians.

They're just too polite to apologize all the time. No, thank you. No, that's just bigotry. So restricting who, that's injustice. But restricting how we play is justice. There are certain things where you draw the line and you say, no, I won't let you punch my brother in the face. No, I won't let you treat my sister like that. No, I won't let you treat me like that. You're going to have to stop.

Restricting the how, saying this is how we're going to treat one another, loving our neighbor, loving our friends, loving our family as ourselves. That's where justice begins to flow. That's where justice can begin to make its home. We're not where we say, well, just everything goes.

[22 : 53] But rather we say, no, are you caring and loving and self-sacrificing and others-oriented? And is your love patient and kind? And does it hope and does it believe? And is it going to be mean-spirited?

Well, then no, we're going to have to put a stop to that. And it gets complicated because when we create communities like the Table Church, like this one, we get to wrestle with these as a community.

And there are toxic, unhealthy ways of doing that that are top-down where one person or one committee of people gets to make the decisions for everybody else. Play this way, not that way, we said so, or else.

That's toxic. That's not helpful. And so we enter into a much messier way of doing things where we have to do it together, all together, or else we're saying someone doesn't get to play. Putting limits on who can belong in our family or a church or a social group denies the reconciling work of Christ. Putting limits on the who is saying whatever Jesus did, it wasn't good enough for those kinds of people. And not putting limits on how we treat one another or how we allow ourselves to be treated will lead inevitably to chaos and abuse and turmoil. We don't put the limits on the who, but we do need to figure out as a community on how. How will we love one another well? How will we say no to injustice? How will we say no to abuse? How will we say yes to being this kind of self-sacrificing, others-oriented kind of people that are only looking for our own interests, but looking outside and looking at the interests of others? So a few application questions before we move into communion. Number one, are there any people or groups of people who I have rejected, not because of what they've done, but because of who they are, the worship team wants to make their way forward?

Are there any people or groups of people who I've just said, no, you can't be a part of my life, can't be a part of my family, you can't be a part of my church, can't be part of my small group, you can't be in a relationship with me, not because of what they've done, because of who they are.

[25 : 15] Number two, are there people in my life I'm letting get away with injustice to myself or to others, just because I feel like I have to accept them? That kind of wishy-washy, flimsy kind of love that says, well, you know, I don't want to offend anybody. Like we talked about last week, sometimes love gets confrontational. Number three, am I using grace as an excuse to cover up the ways that I don't live up to loving my neighbor as myself? I get to belong. I can claim that and I can know that in Jesus. I get to play. I get to be part of God's family and God's community of grace.

But that is not an excuse for me to treat others poorly, to not treat them as I would want myself to be treated. Would you pray with me? Gracious and almighty God.