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Galatians 3:28, NRSV.

²⁸ 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.

Kurds and Christians.

We are all familiar with the two great commandments from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus proclaims that these commandments encompass all that is implied by the entire Mosaic Law. In Matthew, this occurs in Chapter 22, and it is late in the ministry of Jesus; he is teaching in the Temple court in Jerusalem, a customary place of public speaking. It is what we call Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' earthly life. He has recently ridden a donkey into Jerusalem. He has cleared the Temple of money changers. We are at the climax of a series of hostile arguments by religious authorities of Jesus' day. The context of this specific passage is that rabbis of the time counted 613 laws in the Torah, the most holy collection of Hebrew Scriptural writings, and what we call the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. A religious legal authority asks Jesus to specify the single greatest commandment. He is trying to force Jesus

to pick only one of the 613 Mosaic laws, which would trap Jesus into seemingly dismissing the other 612 laws. Here is the passage from Chapter 22 of Matthew:

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus, in his typical cleverness, summarizes all the 613 laws by quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus, where the two great commandments are originally stated. He implies that if you obey these two, you will fulfill the spirit of all the laws. In doing so, Jesus also lays down for us, 2,000 years later, the overriding commandments followed by followers of Christ.

To gain some details on what it means to be a Christian, we can read, from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' long discourse that occurs early in his ministry, in Chapter 5 of Matthew. In this sermon, Jesus delivers the Beatitudes. The word "beatitude" refers to a great blessing or a statement of joy:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

These state, in a beautifully poetic and elegant fashion, and most importantly in an affirming and uplifting fashion, the key characteristics of a genuine Christian.

The Beatitudes speak of having humility, having a desire to live in a morally correct way, offering forgiveness, being ingenuous and not hypocritical, standing up for one’s faith in the face of persecution, and ultimately, being joyous at the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of godly people who have come before us.

Today, we look at another source of key Christian principles: Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia, which was probably directed at multiple congregations in what was Asia Minor, but is now Turkey. Asia Minor was never a single, integrated nation, and it is difficult to know exactly where these Galatian congregations were. We are confident that the author was Paul the great evangelist. The clear reason for writing the letter is that the believers in the Corinthian church were facing powerful pressure to abandon the foundation of their faith. There were missionaries who were Jews and sincere followers of Christ, but they were essentially preaching the Torah, and not a refined form of

Jesus' teachings. This letter was written around the year 50 A.D. The large majority of Galatian believers were gentiles, not Jews. As in Romans, Paul is hard selling the principle that we are made righteous in the eyes of God via our faith, not by following intricate laws. Rather than focusing on this aspect of the letter, I want to look at the very concrete, uplifting aspects of the letter, where Paul affirms the joy and beauty of following Christ and living by the Gospel.

A handful of years ago, Wendy and I traveled to Turkey. We visited Istanbul in the northwest, the city that is famous as the connection between Asia and Europe. We visited some coastal areas in the west and south. Istanbul used to be Constantinople, the "City of Constantine", and the capital of the eastern Christian Church. We went to ancient Ephesus, which became the center of the Christian Church after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. The city was on the coast in Paul's time, but the ruins are now four miles inland. Turkey is very predominately Muslim, now, but Turkey is also very multi-ethnic. One night we went into a tiny restaurant in a dense neighborhood in Istanbul. The woman waiting on us turned out to be the owner. The food was great and we started chatting with her while we ate. She said that she was a Kurd and proceeded to talk about the long history of discrimination against Kurds in Turkey. The Kurds are indigenous to the mountains of western Asia, an area known as Kurdistan,

which includes parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Syria. That is the problem: the Kurds don't have a nation of their own, and instead, the estimated 40 million Kurds are spread among lands where they are the minority. When the Ottoman Empire was broken up after World War I, their land was divided among neighboring states. The Kurds are predominately Suni Muslims. They traditionally speak Kurdish, but Turkey, which has about 16 million Kurds, had for many years, a law against speaking Kurdish. Today, it can be dangerous to speak Kurdish in public. Kurdish leaders are routinely imprisoned, and publications and broadcasts in Kurdish are shut down by the government. We'll call the woman who ran this restaurant Jiyan (Jee-yan). I'll get back to what she had to say to us.

We did not go to the interior of Turkey where the Galatians lived and is now home to many Kurdish people. Here is the beginning of Galatians, Chapter 5:

5¹ *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

This is a famous verse. In Galatians, Paul makes it clear that the follower of Christ is free from fear of legalism or the belief that we must somehow earn our freedom, never knowing if we have done enough. We also are not bound by the things of a materialistic world, which tend to hold us prisoner. And importantly,

as Christians, we are free from the discrimination that comes with human systems. It will still happen, but we rise above it. Paul writes this of the Christian:

²⁸ 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.

In Chapter 5, Paul emphasizes that a core belief of the Christian is to use our faith, and not any legal system, as a vehicle for offering love to the world:

the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

A Christian is not selfish. Paul sums up with one of Christ's great commandments:

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul goes on to end Chapter 5 by arguing that not living for the things of this world, not being constrained by the biases of people around us, and by accepting the freedom that comes from having faith, we inherit an incredible gift:

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

This is one of the most beautiful passages in all of the New Testament. If we accept the freedom we have as people of faith, we can offer love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, and faithfulness. If we live our faith, the Spirit will guide us. Paul writes that two of the uplifting aspects of faith are gentleness and self-control. We must always be gentle. And self-control is to be celebrated, not seen as a limitation, because the lack of self-control is what causes so much chaos in our society, well, today. Paul also tells us to not be conceited or envious. We work together, rather than compete, at least when it comes to spiritual things. We are not to consider ourselves to be better than others: that leads to bigotry.

Getting back to Jiyan (Jee-yan), she was around fifty years-old. She was clearly angry and embittered, but we certainly couldn't judge her for that. She told us how she and her people had been treated in Turkish society. She said that they had high rates of unemployment, that no one would hire them. She said that Kurds who were employed worked menial jobs, earning almost nothing. And this subjugation was passed down, generation after generation.

Let's look back at Paul's statement in Galatians, telling them that as Christians, they are equal, and that in the eyes of God, all people are the same. Being a Christian means that they live in a kingdom that is not like the ethnically and economically stratified kingdom of the Roman Empire - and of Jewish society.

²⁸ 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.

When we read this verse, we understand the pressure on some Gentile followers of Christ to follow Mosaic Law. We embrace the good news of how Jesus is the Messiah of all people. We can relate to the words about male vs. female, as this was a culture where the law heavily favored men, and women were left with few legal rights; the statement that God has no such bias would have been a very powerful statement to early Christian women. But we tend today, in America, to read past the *“there is no longer slave or free”* part of this because our society no longer has slavery. Roman society relied heavily on slave labor; it was a pervasive institution, with perhaps 30% of the population enslaved. Slaves were sometimes war captives, or were serving out a criminal punishment, or had been reduced to slavery due to overwhelming debts. Slavery was inherited – and so most slaves were simply the children of slaves. Slaves performed manual labor in agriculture and in households, and even when they were used in skilled positions, like financial stewards in businesses, they were not rewarded monetarily.

I was reminded of our dinner discussion with Jiyan (Jee-yan) when I was rereading Galatians recently. There are a handful of very memorable people whom I have met over the decades while traveling – and Jiyan (Jee-yan) stands out among them. Her restaurant was empty, except for Wendy and me, and we have wondered how she managed to survive, and how she is doing today.

In the last Chapter of Galatians, Paul summarizes his key points, and he offers closing words of wisdom to the followers of Christ living in Galatia. The following is a frequently quoted passage:

² Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴ All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵ For all must carry their own loads.

Indeed, the world would be a much kinder and joyous place if we helped each other with their loads, and didn't treat some people as unworthy. But why does Paul say that we must "*Bear one another's burdens*" but then say, "*For all must carry their own loads*". "*Burdens*" sounds a lot like "*loads*", and so do we bear or carry our own problems or not? The original Greek makes it clearer. The word for "*burden*" in biblical Greek is "*barē*", which is a physical word referring to the activity of crushing of boulders, referring to a severe situation, one that could break a person. The word for "*load*" is "*phortion*", which is another physical word that refers to the standard cargo size of a ship. So, this passage means that we take care of our own daily duties and responsibilities, but when things are overbearing, we absolutely must help each other. Life is not easy for anyone, certainly not for Galatian Christians, but our fellow believers will help us during particularly difficult times. It's also important to note that when Paul says, "² Bear

one another's burdens", he is referring to helping all people, not just followers of Christ. We, as the faithful, must be there for anyone made in the image of God.

Things are no better today for the Kurds of Turkey than when Wendy and I were there. The Kurds are still very much marginalized, are subject to political repression, don't have legal protections to speak their language openly, and are not recognized as a legitimate ethnic minority. Like the lost tribes of the Northern Kingdom after Assyria conquered them, the Kurds are dispersed among unfriendly peoples, with not one of them welcoming the Kurds. And like the people of the ten lost tribes, the Kurds today are under intense pressure to drop their language and culture, and blend into the surrounding population. As generations go by, more Kurds disappear as an identifiable ethnic community. There are, of course, many more populations in this world who are under duress in authoritarian nations dominated by unfriendly ethnic groups.

Humanity has not learned the lesson of Galatians: that listening to the Holy Spirit within us uplifts not just ourselves, but everyone around us – because we live with grace and generosity and empathy. As Christians, we don't fall prey to ethnic and economic biases. We remember what Paul declares in Chapter 5:

²² The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control."