

## *Email Theology*

**Galatians 5:22-26, CEB** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified self with its passions and its desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let's not become arrogant, make each other angry, or be jealous of each other.

**Luke 18:9-14, CEB** Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: <sup>10</sup> "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else--crooks, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

## *Email Theology*

Some time within the past year I got an email from someone – I have no memory of who sent it to me – an email asking the question, “If being a Christian was illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” I had forgotten about that email until we were more than half way through my sabbatical. We were worshiping at a church that was built before 1500. The pastor of the congregation was out on sick leave and others were filling the pulpit. The guest pastor preaching that Sunday began his sermon by asking, “If being a Christian was illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” That email message had traveled half-way around the world and was used by an Irish minister in a pulpit in Scotland. When you put something out in an email, you never know where it will end up. You lose all control over where it will go, how quickly it will spread, and how it might get modified along the way.

If you should change your mind or realize that you were mistaken, what you said is out there and it has a life of its own. There are a lot of urban legends, fear mongering, propaganda lies, and bad theology floating around in the ether. There are some things that have been proven false but get resurrected three to six years later, with the names changed and more material added, and they're circulated again. Some have been through three or four cycles, spreading fear, hatred, lies, and confusion each time. All of this is to say that there are a lot of good reasons to be cautious and to read things with a critical eye. Be careful about what you pass on.

So much of the religious messages that one receives via the internet – and this includes all electronic social media, email, Facebook, twitter, text messages, etc., etc. – so many of the messages are bad pop theology. Perhaps the most common type is the "expect magic to happen." Pass this message on to twelve friends and God will bless you with sudden cures for your illness, a winning lottery ticket, or a loving relationship with your abusive spouse. On the other hand, if you fail to pass the email on to all of your friends, you'll lose your hair, develop bunions on your left foot, your husband will run off with an older woman, and your dog will gnaw a hole in the washing machine water hose, flooding the house and ruining the carpet!.

But it isn't just the magical behavior that's bad theology. The insinuation is that you can manipulate God. You pass on the message and God is automatically obligated to do extraordinary things for you. But if you don't, then God will rain on your parade. When we see our relationship with God this way, we're imagining that God is a lot like us. We tend to be nice to people who are

nice to us and dislike people who treat us poorly, We think of life as working this way, favor in return for favor, insult leading to insult. We say that "turn-about is fair play." But Isaiah (55:9) tells us that God's ways are higher than our ways.<sup>1</sup> Instead of thinking that God is like us, Jesus encouraged us to be more like God. He said, "Love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. . . . You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for he is kind to ungrateful and wicked people."<sup>36</sup> Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate." (Luke 6:35-36 CEB) We mess up when we try to drag God down to our level. Instead we need to aspire to be more Christ-like.

The second form of bad theology is the message that you're a stinking pile of sin and God is out of patience and eager to strike you down any minute now and send you straight to hell and listen to you scream in agony for a gazillion years. You are guilty, you are damned, in fact, you are damned guilty and your only hope is to have the hell scared out of you this very instant. This is wrong-headed on so many levels that it's hard to know where to start. We are part of God's wonderful creation and God declared it to be good, very good. What's more, we're made in God's image. The Psalmist marveled at this, saying, "What are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?"<sup>5</sup> You've made them only slightly less than divine, crowning them with glory and grandeur." (Psalm 8:4-5 CEB) That isn't to say that we don't make mistakes, that we don't misbehave, or that we don't fail to act as we should sometimes. Paul put it clearly when he wrote to the Christians in Rome, saying, "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory," (Romans 3:23 CEB) But that doesn't keep God from loving us and reaching out to us. Paul goes on to write, "But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 CEB)

The third form of bad pop theology is the "it's wonderful that I'm saved and it's your tough luck that you aren't." This approach is popular because it makes us feel secure and safe. That's what we tell ourselves. But underlying that is the happy smugness of "I'm so thankful that I'm not like those folks over there." I think God for blessing me and that I'm not Hispanic, Chinese, Arabic, Jewish, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, a garbage collector, a fruit picker, a sheep herder, uneducated, impoverished, etc., etc., etc. The unspoken sentiment is that God loves people like us – and obviously doesn't love all those other folks very much at all.

This is wrong on at least two counts. It diminishes God to being like us, when we know that God is no respecter of persons. God reached out not only to Jews, but to Roman army officers, Ethiopian eunuchs, idol worshippers all over the Roman Empire, people both rich and poor, in short, everybody.

Secondly, this smugness reeks of self-righteousness and Jesus spoke against that attitude over and over again. In today's reading from the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector. A Pharisee was a person who tried very hard to obey every single rule and regulation found in scripture. This Pharisee in the story fasted twice a week. That's a spiritual discipline that none of us do. He gave a tenth of every last dime of his income – and I won't ask you to raise your hand if your giving is at that level. Fasting and tithing are good things. Tax collectors, on the other hand, worked for the Roman occupation forces. To say that they were unpatriotic would be a gross understatement. What's more, they were known for exaggerating the tax they demanded in order to fill their own pockets. But Jesus says that the tax collector goes home from worship justified and forgiven but the Pharisee does not. The tax collector humbly admits his failings, but the Pharisee is puffed up with self-righteousness,

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<sup>1</sup> CEB **Isaiah 55:9** Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.

So when you get a religious message, don't pass it on to others without giving it some careful thought. Does it promise magical results? Does it suggest that you can make God do what you want? Does it suggest that people are worthless and bad and God is eager to fry them? Does it say we are so blessed because God loves us more than other people?

Those religious messages that you get on the internet? They aren't just an electronic phenomena. You can hear those messages on Sunday morning all over town. We need to hear – and our friends and neighbors need to hear – that God doesn't make trash. We are God's wonderful creation, despite our fumbling, stumbling lives. We are to live in awe of God's patience and love - and respond with gratitude and thankfulness. Receiving God's mercy, we are to treat others with compassion and kindness, humbly sharing the love and blessings that we have received.

The question was, "If being a Christian was illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" That's the wrong question. It's based on guilt and suffering. Here's a better question. How shall we live so that people see Christ in us, not just in our words, but in our actions, our whole way of living? A lot of people are put off by those who mouth a lot of holy sounding phrases, because often they don't see a life that matches up with the righteous chatter. Paul wrote that when we have God's Spirit in our hearts, we act with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Now, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is an impressive list and every one of us could do a bit better at everyone one of those. I suggest that you pick one and pay special attention to it for a while until it has become a bit of a habit. Just before I left on sabbatical we watched a video about kindness. A man helped a boy who fell off his skateboard. He in turn helped a lady with packages to cross the street, and she gave a young woman a quarter for the parking meter, and on and on it went, with each person paying kindness forward. That Sunday we took home cards that we could give to strangers when we did an act of kindness for them. I hope you did that. I hope you will pick up more cards to share as you share kindness where it is needed. May we be kind to others just as our God is kind to us. Amen.

May God's blessing surround us each day  
As we trust God and walk in Christ's footsteps  
May the Holy Spirit's presence within us guard and keep us from sin.  
Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.  
And all of God's people said – AMEN

**Colossians 3:11-15, CEB** In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. <sup>14</sup> And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. <sup>15</sup> The peace of Christ must control your hearts--a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people.