

**Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White:
Gray Is Good?!**
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This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church. Welcome to the Church who still welcomes Wolverine fans and 'Bama fans. Those who have ears, let them hear!

I'm reading a passage of Scripture this morning from the book of Galatians, Paul's letter to Galatia. Galatia is not a city; it is not a church. It is an area. This is a traveling letter to a number of churches. One of the things Paul is addressing in this passage is: In the churches of Galatia, they had many who were going to extremes, to the right and to the left. Does that sound familiar? Imagine that! Almost two thousand years ago, Paul was addressing the same thing we are addressing in this series. This comes from Galatians, chapter 2, beginning with verse 17.

“If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a law breaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”
May God bless the reading of His Word.

I have degrees from two different seminaries: New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana, which is a Southern Baptist seminary, and Memphis Cumberland Presbyterian Seminary, which is a Cumberland Presbyterian seminary in Memphis, Tennessee. In Tennessee, as far as I know, there was no dress code or hair code. There was no prohibition against smoking or drinking. In New Orleans, it was very different. They were theologically conservative and practically conservative. And so, the dress code wasn't that strenuous, but you couldn't wear T-shirts to class, and you couldn't wear shorts, and you couldn't wear sandals or flip-flops. Hair was a different thing. Men could have no facial hair, and men's hair had to be short, and women's hair had to be long. So, how and who defines what is long hair? And how do you decide what is short hair? Now, this sticks out for me because I got in trouble for having too-long hair. Back in the day, my hairline started just above my eyebrows, and I used to wear my hair a lot longer. And they defined long hair for men as being on the collar. And so one week, for whatever reason, I missed a haircut. Anyway, I got in trouble for having long hair. And I was told: “Get your hair cut, or don't come back next week.” This is in seminary. Now, that wasn't humorous at the time. As I look back on it, I find it very humorous, because we were also required to go to Chapel. Nothing wrong with that. We would go to Chapel. But out in front of the Chapel was either the Hall of Fame or the Wall of Fame, I forget what they called it, but it was the founding fathers of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Every single one of those guys had facial hair and hair on their shoulders, every one of them! And what is short hair for women? And who gets to decide that? Things are relative.

Today we are still in our series of sermons on “Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White.” And I realize that term “gray,” like long or short hair, is a relative thing. What

does it mean? What am I saying when I say, "Gray is good"? I want to dispel some myths, some misconceptions. I'm not talking about compromise. I'm not talking about moderate. I'm not talking about a watered-down, wishy-washy Gospel. What I'm talking about is a radical allegiance to the New Covenant. I'm talking about an extreme allegiance to Jesus Christ, and an extreme allegiance to unity within the Body of Christ. That's what I'm talking about. It's not an "either or," it is a "both and." Human beings throughout history have a tendency to gravitate. Depending on their personality and their personal disposition, they gravitate either to the left or to the right. We have a tendency. We're not static. If you want an interesting read at some time, read about the old hermits of Idaho, the ones who moved up on the Salmon River and lived by themselves for years. You talk about some strange dudes. Now, they were. We have a tendency as human beings to gravitate. The same is true in the Christian church. We gravitate either toward personal holiness or social justice; gravitate toward holiness or grace; works or faith; legalism or liberty; Old Covenant or New Covenant.

In our passage, Paul says very clearly that Jesus fulfilled the Law, the Old Covenant. Salvation is a gift from God. We are to follow Jesus' example and the Holy Spirit that He has sent for us. We are not saved by obeying the law. Is that clear? We're not saved by works. At the same time, as the great reformer Martin Luther said, "We are saved by faith alone, but not faith that is alone." James said, "Faith without works is dead." Paul rejected both legalism and liberalism. He would say, "We are not saved by works, but if we are saved, we will work." It is not either one or the other, it is both and.

Now, let's be honest. Some people are attracted to legalism. Some people are attracted to liberalism. Some people at the extreme of legalism say, "Just give me a list of rules. Don't make me think about it; give me a list of rules. Okay. I did not kill anybody today. I did not lie today. I did not commit adultery today. I did not... So, I'm good." At the other extreme are the libertines who say, "Well, you know what? God is a God of grace, and God loves to forgive sin. Let's give Him something to forgive!" They both have their attractions. The delicate balance between the two is what I'm describing as gray. The problem is, you see, we human beings have a way of complicating things. We dispute over the balance. We argue over the balance. We argue about what is long hair and what is short hair. And we disagree about what is essential. At one of the seminaries I went to, they didn't give a rip what your hair looked like. It wasn't essential at all. At the other one, it was very essential. You could not attend if you did not comply. So, we argue about what is essential. And who gets to decide what is essential? I would love to have been in that meeting where they were discussing the length of men's hair and women's hair, wouldn't you? How do you determine that? And do you get to determine what is essential for me? Do I get to determine what is essential for you? Or must we determine that for ourselves?

So, we have a problem with this unity of the Body. We can only achieve unity if we intentionally listen to one another. James said we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Instead, too often we are slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to anger. And the polarization occurs when we don't listen to one another. You know, we don't have to agree. We can agree to disagree agreeably. We can agree to disagree without being disagreeable. One of the beautiful things about this church, one of the things that that attracted me to this church, was the fact that the denominations that came together to form Central United Protestant Church did not agree about essentials, but they agreed in radically following Jesus Christ. They agreed that unity in

the Body of Christ is important. They agreed that they could set aside their differences for the purpose of the Gospel. That attracted me to this congregation.

Now, in our passage, Paul says if we are saved by obeying the law, Jesus died for nothing. And at the same time, we are to put off our own desires, die to ourselves, so that Jesus Christ can live again through us. It has been said that a saint is someone in whom Jesus lives again. The New Covenant is loving one another as Jesus loved us. That means embracing the Gospel, embracing the good news, and radically following Jesus in loving one another. So, when I talk about gray, I'm not talking about moderation. I'm not talking about compromise. I'm not talking about a wishy-washy Gospel. I'm talking about radically following Jesus Christ. John Wesley said, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?" Without a doubt, we can. All God's children can unite, despite these small differences. Gray is not middle-of-the-road, wishy-washy. It is embracing the Gospel: that human beings are messed up and in need of saving, and Jesus Christ is God's answer. And, seeking to follow Christ and loving our neighbor as ourselves, which means in order to tell a hungry man that Jesus is the bread of life, you've got to feed him first. In order to tell a thirsty person that Jesus Christ is the living water, you've got to give him something to drink. It is not either or, it is both and. And when these two get out of balance, we're unhealthy.

Personal holiness without social responsibility is spiritual selfishness. Let me say that again: Personal holiness without social responsibility is spiritual selfishness. I've heard that called spiritual narcissism. It's me, me, me, mine, mine, mine, without giving. At the same time, social gospel without personal holiness promotes sin. It's what the great theologian of World War Two, the Lutheran theologian of World War Two, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called "cheap grace." It is not one or the other; it is both and: uncompromised personal holiness and social justice. That's what I mean by gray.

Now, this sermon comes with a disclaimer. Don't you love that? It comes with a disclaimer and a caution. If you embrace the gray as I have described it, personal holiness and social justice, you may be rejected by the left and by the right. But you'll be in good company. That's exactly what happened to Jesus. He was rejected by the spiritual elite on the right and on the left, and they killed him for it. Embracing personal holiness and social responsibility by loving others as Jesus loved us, you will be following Jesus' example. And if you follow Jesus, there's a likelihood that you're not going to fit in.

So, what's it going to be? Do you want to fit in with the right? Do you want to fit in with the left? Or do you want to fit in with Jesus? What I'm challenging you to do is to forget about right and left. What I'm challenging you to do is forget about long hair and short hair. (That's supposed to be funny, y'all! It was funny to me!) What I'm encouraging you to do is follow Jesus Christ. And if you fit in, you fit in, and if you don't, you don't. Let's pray.

Lord, we acknowledge that we are sometimes guilty of wanting to fit in with one group or another. And we apologize for that. Forgive us, please. Lord, help us as we claim to be Your followers. Help us to actually do that. Help us to follow Your example. Help us to love those that You love. And Lord, help us to love like You loved. In Jesus' name, amen.