



πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ • pisteos Jesou Christou • faith of Jesus Christ
Galatians 3:19-29

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Over the past eight weeks, we have been exploring how our English translations of the Bible affect our understanding of the intent of the Biblical word. With little hesitation, it is clear the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts that comprised the original manuscripts of our Biblical text offer complications when translating into modern languages. The reason that over 2500 different translations of the Bible exist today, including 450 different English translations, is that we all want to read the text in a way that makes sense to us. Yet, no translation is as good at speaking to the Biblical text than the ancient languages themselves.

As we look to faithfully translate these texts today, we are presented with all kinds of linguistic challenges. Primarily, we have no native ancient Hebrew and Greek speakers still living to aid our translation. No one can speak from personal knowledge as to the original languages. Secondly, the context of the ancient world, and the context of the full Biblical text matters; and, well, none of us lived in those days, so we are at best making educated guesses regarding context due to other Greco-Roman and ancient Hebrew accounts. Third, given we have to make decisions without native speakers present, we have to name the shortcomings of linguistic aids such as etymology in discerning the nuances of these ancient languages. And finally, everyone who sits down to translate the Biblical text does so with personal convictions about what the text should say. We can offer grace and trust translators have the best intentions in their translating decisions, but they are still that – translating decisions.

You may ask, why should we be so worried about translating decisions? How do individual decisions make that big of a difference? The text is pretty black and white, how can any one word make such a difference?

Admittedly, there are some translating decisions that seem rather insignificant. For example, you've probably heard the story of Jonah in the Old Testament. Growing up, I remember learning all about Jonah and the whale. The story, quite simplistically, goes like this: Jonah was told by God to go to Ninevah. He didn't want to go to Ninevah, so, he got on a boat going in the opposite direction. God caused a storm, and Jonah was thrown overboard. Jonah was swallowed by a whale. By God's grace, Jonah survived in the belly of the whale for a few days before the whale spat him out onto the shore. God again said to Jonah, go to Ninevah. This time, Jonah went to Ninevah.

It's a great story with some significant implications on how we understand God. But there's a legit debate as to whether the sea creature that swallowed Jonah is a whale, or just a large fish. Google this, you'll find, people spend way too much time with this debate. A whale is a mammal,

not a fish, so if the text says, “*a great fish* swallowed Jonah,” could it have been a whale? Did the author of the story take the time to accurately name the species of the fish? Does it make a difference in the importance of the story? If we teach our children it was a giant shark instead of a whale, do they understand God differently? Do they understand sharks differently? Is this why we love whales, but fear sharks? Because whales spit people out, but sharks eat people? ... Perhaps there’s a significant reason to have a strong opinion as to the genus and species of the creature, but personally, I’m not sure it matters. It’s a translative detail that doesn’t seem to greatly impact how we understand God, or how we understand faithful discipleship today.

But not every decision in translation is so insignificant. Over the past two months we’ve looked at how words like *doulos*, *arsenokoites*, and *anthropos* have been used to marginalize people in the church and in the community. We’ve identified that how we translate certain words affects how we treat whole subsets of God’s creation that is humanity. Other translative decisions have led to huge debates and divisions within the greater Church – in the world of Christendom. As today’s focus will highlight, there are some very minor translative decisions that have *huge* impacts on the church, the church’s engagement in the world, and our understanding of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ.

As we dive in to this, I want you to look at the person next to you and say, “I have the trust of a child.” (go ahead, say it!) Turn to the person on the other side of you, or behind you, and say it again, “I have the trust of a child.”

Now, I want you to think to yourself, what did you just say? What does this statement, “I have the trust of a child,” mean?

Does this statement mean that I know a child who trusts me? I have the trust of a *child*. ... Or, does this mean that you only trust as a child trusts? That you have a child’s level of trust? I have the *trust* of a child. ... Both of these understandings are possible from this statement, “I have the trust of a child.”

The difference in these two understandings hinges on the phrase “of a child.” If we read this in, what English professors would call, the subjective genitive, *the child* becomes the subject of the clause. If *the child* is the subject of the clause, we are talking about a child who trusts. In this case, the sentence would mean that there is a child who has trusts me. ... However, if we read this in, what English professors would call, the objective genitive, *the child* becomes the object of the clause. In this objective genitive case, *trust* is the subject, and the child is the object of that trust. So, in this case, we would be saying that I have trust that is like a child’s – my level of trust is like that of a child.

Choosing between the subjective genitive and the objective genitive has a significant impact in our scriptural text here in Galatians 3, and which option we choose for translative purposes has an impact on how we understand the relationship between faithfulness and righteousness. This doesn’t just impact our own understanding of God, it impacts our understanding of God’s engagement in the world, and the salvation of humanity.

Let's set the stage for Galatians 3.

Paul is writing to the church a challenging letter that is focused on looking at the difference between the law and faith in regards to righteousness. In some of his letters, Paul talks about the law as "holy, just, and good," and names how we should not lose our attentiveness to the law. Here, Paul's articulation of the law is, well, less enthusiastic.

Beginning in verse 19, Paul begins to articulate the reason the law exists. "The law was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to the whole promise that had been made." The law was set in place because people were straying from God's will. ... I always love finding out about odd rules or laws that exist throughout the world. For example, in Missouri, bear wrestling is against the law. In Arizona, it's illegal for a donkey to sleep in a bathtub. In Alabama, there's a law that forbids driving while blindfolded. They're odd laws, that one might ask, why does these law exist?

Sadly, we don't we need to ask this question. We know why these laws exist. The reason these laws exist is because, before the law existed, someone tried them. Someone, or enough people, were willing to engage in bear wrestling in Missouri, that they had to enact a law to prevent it from happening any more. I'm not sure I want to know what happened with the donkey sleeping in the bathtub, but clearly it was a practice that needed to be stopped. ... This is how laws come to be – they are set in place to say that the things you are doing are not right. Paul says God gave us the law for the same reason – to correct our path from the transgressions that were taking place. "The advent of the law turned unconscious wrong-doing into known, willful, disobedience, to the end that something could be done about it."ⁱ

So, the law was given to stop transgressions, and Paul asks this rhetorical follow-up question, is the "law opposed to the promises of God?" If the law is restrictive – if the law was given to put limits on what we could and couldn't do – does the law then stand in opposition to the promises of God that are liberation and freedom from sin and death? I say it's a rhetorical question because in this text, Paul clearly thinks the answer is yes, the law is opposed to the promises of God.

Paul answers his own question by making the point, "If the law had been given to make us alive, then we would have received righteousness through the law." If God's desire for us, if God's promise for us, is to be found free from the powers of sin and death and living in accordance with the will of God – then the law should enable us to live into this righteousness. But that's not the law's purpose. The law was restrictive in nature, not freeing, so how could the law have helped us lived freely in righteousness? For Paul, "true freedom is found in the promise [of God], not the law."ⁱⁱ

So, what brings about this freeing promise of God?

Verse 22 in our pew Bible reads, “The scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

Here, we find the Greek clause, *pisteos Jesou Christou*. It is a phrase similar to, “I have the trust of a child.” More literally, in a direct translation from the Greek, the clause reads “through the faith of Jesus Christ.” There is a great debate if this is meant to be read in the subjective genitive or the objective genitive. In the subjective genitive reading, we would be referring to “Jesus’ faithfulness,” or “Jesus’s faith,” where Jesus is the subject who has faith. In the objective genitive reading, we would be speaking of faith in Jesus Christ, or faith like Jesus Christ, where Jesus is the object of faith.

Such a small edit in translation, but consider the implications of this change.

If Paul is saying that the promise of God – namely, the freedom of righteousness to God’s will – comes from the faith *we* have in Jesus Christ – where Jesus is the *object* of our faith, then the onus for righteousness is on *us*. The promise of salvation is offered and granted only to those who have this defined faith *in* Jesus Christ.

However, if Paul is saying that the promise of God – namely, the freedom of righteousness to God’s will – comes from the faith *of* Jesus Christ – where Jesus is the *subject* whose faith we are speaking of, then the onus for righteousness is on *God through Christ*. The promise of salvation would then be offered and granted not just to those who have faith in Jesus Christ, but would be offered to perhaps a much wider audience because our faith is not the focus; instead, the focus is on Jesus’s faithfulness.

A formal translation leaves us grasping for answers that are not so quickly found in this verse. Scholars have tried to make comparative debates using other New Testament texts, and by comparing this passage to other uses in Paul’s letters. Even a historical search, comparing thoughts on this text from the early patristic writers, to 18th, 19th, and 20th Century scholars, leaves us split between two options that are both possible given our limited knowledge of Paul’s intent in using a clause that can be read both objectively and subjectively in its genitive form.

Etymology and knowledge of the ancient Greek gives us a good sense of which words to use, but we end up with this sentence which reads, “What was promised by the faith of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” So, do we mean that our faith in Jesus Christ is what distinguishes us as believers, or, do we mean that Jesus’ faith is what makes it possible for us to believe? Is our righteousness based on us having right faith? Or is it based on Christ’s faith, given to us?

As we keep reading in verses 23-27, we find some helpful words. Paul says, “before faith came, we were imprisoned by the law until faith would be revealed.” The law kept us in line until we were able to see what faith looked like. “The law was our disciplinarian (or our custodian) until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.”

So the law was a custodian which, like the signs on a path through the woods in a state park, served the purpose of keeping us from straying outside the lines. The law kept us focused on the path in front of us, like the blinders on a race horse. But the law was about rigidity – offered to guide us until Christ came. And then Christ came, and Paul says, “now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian (a custodian of the law) for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. Again we should ask, whose faith? If we were bound to the law until Christ came, until Christ exemplified faithfulness, it seems Paul is referring to the faith of Christ – it is Jesus’ faithfulness that Paul is speaking about.

Again, I want to reiterate that scholars are pretty divided in their opinion of this. It doesn’t seem that our linguistic understanding of Paul is sufficient to know exactly what he meant – whether he was speaking of our faith in Christ, or Christ’s faithfulness. And therefore, to get a better sense of what Paul meant, we have to look at a greater witness of the Biblical text. That will be our task in Lent – to take a greater look at the faithfulness of Christ in the Gospels. Because ultimately, how we read this text – objectively or subjectively – matters. It matters because of how Paul concludes this text. In verses 28-29, Paul writes, “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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

“Because Jesus’ faith is epitomized in the circumstances surrounding a death which mediates God’s salvation, [Christ] becomes the source of faith for others. Because of what [Christ] achieved on behalf of all, others may now share his faith and its benefits.”ⁱⁱⁱ If we believe that this is about *Christ’s* faithfulness, then we are willing to expand our understanding of who is invited to this table. But if we choose to believe this is speaking just about *our* faith in Christ, about *our* ability to respond, then it puts us in the driving seat of who can ultimately receive God’s promise of righteousness. And it seems, in these concluding verses, that Paul believed this faith was a faith that tore down walls, not a faith that built walls up. Paul seems to believe that this faith was one that removed the demarcations that had divided the community, instead of being a faith that further splintered communities.

The ancient text matters. The details of God’s word in the Biblical scriptures as they were first written make a difference. They make a difference because of words like *anthropos*, which has been used to exclude women from church leadership, or the word *arsenokoites*, which has been used to marginalize our LGBTQ siblings, or the word *doulos*, which has been used to support chattel slavery in America ... the text is not black and white in our English translations, and yes, at times, our English translations get it wrong. But, praise be to God, that Christ had enough faith to be obedient even to a Roman cross, that we are no longer bound by the law, but instead, we are freed because of the *pisteos Jesou Christou*, freed in the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ. May we live in the glory of the freedom of sin and death, a freedom, a liberation, marked by the faithfulness of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Charles B. Cousar. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Galatians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Cousar.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard B. Hays. *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.