

A Tale of Two Mothers

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. I've got a book review to do before I start the sermon proper and I've got a couple of books to plug tonight. This first book is called, and I've got a slide for it, there it is, Why We Love the Church and a great subtitle, if you can read it, In Praise of Institutions and Organised Religion, a provocative title by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck. So they're kind of young evangelicals in the USA. It's kind of a cool book and it's a book basically about having a high view of the church, having a high view of the body of Christ and you'll see that this is very relevant to today's message. So if you're one of those people who are a bit jaded with church, Galatians 4 is for you and that book is probably for you as well. The other book, I don't have a slide for it, but it's C.S.

Lewis, The Pilgrim's Regress. I love C.S. Lewis and you ought to love him as well. It's quite a hard book though. If you haven't read any Lewis, don't start with The Pilgrim's Regress.

Start with something like Mere Christianity or Narnia or one of those books. Narnia is very deep, don't laugh. And The Pilgrim's Regress has a very important character who's going to come up in Galatians that I'll refer to in a moment. Now I've got a clear lectern.

Here we are, we're in Galatians remember and we've spent a lot of time going over this main point about how we get saved. Paul is being crystal clear on this. You are saved, you get to heaven trusting God's promises. That's what it's all about, trusting God's promises delivered in Jesus, delivered in his death and resurrection. That's the way of salvation.

And there are many false gospels, many false paths and the false path that's being corrected in this book of the Bible is the false path of religion as a means to God or investing in yourself, investing in your own morality as a means of opening up heaven, as a means of sort of guaranteeing that you're going to get there through goodianity. That's what Galatians is correcting. Now this is a surprising book really because most of the time the Bible is correcting another false gospel and that's basically that you can live an immoral life and it doesn't matter. And Jesus came, and this is right, to redeem us from sin, from being slaves to sin, from being slaves to immorality and he sets us free when we trust in him. But Galatians makes a complimentary point saying not only do you need to be freed from slavery to sin, you need to be freed from slavery to religion. Not just slavery to sin but slavery to self-righteousness, not only do you need to be freed from immorality, you need to be freed from morality, from depending on that by living only for that. Do you know the kind of person they say, you know, I'm not really into prayer or being close to God but I like the values of Christianity.

There's a person who's into goodianity. That's a false gospel that Paul is correcting and it's a form of slavery. Don't be fooled. It's clear that someone who's addicted to pornography or addicted to a sin, they're a slave to that sin. They can't get out of it until they repent and trust in Jesus and the Holy Spirit breaks the bondage of that sin. It's not as clear in Doncaster that morality is also a way of enslaving people, enslaving them in a false self-confidence, a deceptive, deceitful self-confidence that they are good enough for God. That becomes a form of slavery because it blinds you to the beauty of the cross. It blinds you to the beauty of Jesus that he would shed his blood so that you, a slave of both kinds, could be set free. The passage today ends with this great line, for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. That is, do not submit again to the yoke of religion. Do not submit again to the yoke of goodianity, for freedom

[4 : 37] Christ has set you free. You've died with Christ. Your whole life ought to be wrapped up in Christ now loving him, trusting him, worshipping him, adoring him, that you've been adopted by grace, to call God Abba Father, to be filled with the Spirit, to know that you've died with the Saviour. That's the Christian life. It's not goodianity. Now Paul goes on what looks like a tangent but is actually critical to the book tonight in talking about this theme of motherhood and raising this sort of unusual question, who's your mother? Who's your mother? Who do you belong to? And because

he's arguing against religious people who are obsessed with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, he draws his illustrations from Genesis, from their playground what they were religiously obsessed with and he draws on these two female figures in the book of Genesis, Hagar and Sarah. Now let me just give you some background about Hagar and Sarah.

Sarah was the wife of Abraham and we've already heard about him. He's the father of our faith. He's the one where God first gave his promises of salvation and he was married to Sarah. They were very old, had no kids and Hagar was their slave. They had a lot of slaves and Hagar was like a slave girl, an Egyptian slave girl who was a maid to Sarah and she was a lot younger and you'll see more fertile and all that sort of stuff. Now the hard part of the story is this, God promised Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would be as many as the sand on the sea, shore or the stars in the sky. God made this overwhelmingly gracious but seemingly impossible promise that through them the people of God would become a great nation, that they would give birth to a son and amazing things would happen through him.

But it was to Abraham and Sarah, that was a bit of a joke. In fact they both laughed. Sarah's famous for laughing but Abraham also laughed that they're in their 90s, in their late 90s. Even in biblical times where maybe they're living different ages, there was still a joke. It was impossible that they could bear a child at that age. And so Sarah has a kind of a cunning plan. This is kind of putting things, not trusting God and coming up with your own plan B and that was, she said to her husband, why don't you have a child with my slave girl? That way we can kind of get the promise God has promised and we will make sure it happens.

We will ensure that it happens. They're not trusting the power of God. And so Abraham sleeps with the slave girl and they have a son, Ishmael. And God is very angry at this and they are rebuked. And God does deliver on his promise and Sarah does have a child and she has Isaac. So you've got Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, Ishmael. And these two women for Paul represent two different covenants, two different ways of relating to God that tie in very nicely with the Galatian situation, a way of grace and a way of works. And Paul makes a number of points and I've just got a summary for you that I'll do on the wall. So you've got our mother Hagar and mother Sarah. That's it.

[8 : 15] So there's a dividing line. There's a very different ways of approaching God. Hagar is a slave woman. So everything to do with Hagar in this sort of allegory is to do with slavery. This way of approaching God is a way of slavery. And the fact that she's Egyptian is kind of an allusion to the fact of the time when Israel was in slavery in Egypt, you know, the connotations aren't good for Hagar.

But Sarah is a free woman. She's a free woman. And freedom's an important theme here. So Sarah's free. Hagar, her child is a child of distrust, of, next line, of self-reliance. And so it's not necessarily Hagar's self-reliance. It's actually Sarah's in the end and Abraham's. But the child epitomises its essence of not trusting God, doing it your own way, which is the way religious people think.

On the other hand, Isaac and the child of Sarah, he is a child of promise, a child of grace. He's a free gift, an impossible gift, born to an elderly couple.

Ishmael is born of flesh and Isaac is born of promise. And Paul tells us, kind of explaining his own allegory, what they correspond to in the first century, in the biblical story and in the first century. So verse 25, Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia. That is the place where God's law was given. And the Judaizers are obsessed with this law. It had a temporary purpose, we saw a couple of weeks ago, but that they wanted to last forever, this law. And so she represents Sinai, which also corresponds to earthly Jerusalem. That is, in Paul's day, Jerusalem was filled with Jews who had rejected Jesus, by and large, and were using the law of them as their means of salvation. Not all of them, in fact, the Galatian church was sort of, and the Christian church in Jerusalem was built on Jews who had become followers of the grace of Christ. But Paul is sort of saying, well, generally speaking, Jerusalem today is full of people like Hagar, in the spirit of Hagar, in the spirit of slavery, in the spirit of religion.

On the other hand, Sarah, and this is really critical, verse 26, Sarah corresponds to the Jerusalem that is above. That is, the Jerusalem that is in heaven. And he makes this sort of stunning claim, which I'm really going to want you to just cement in your head, it's a critical image. The other woman corresponds to Jerusalem above. She is free and she is our mother. So if you're a Christian, if you're someone who trusts in Christ, you actually have an identity on this table. You are caught up in this. And your mother is not this covenant where we rely on our own good works, our own

goodianity, but we rely on promise. We rely on grace. We rely on being citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, who is, Paul says, our mother.

[11 : 46] See, what's happening now is the whole book of Galatians is changing gears. You see, you may have thought, and this is wrong, you may have thought that the book has been about you and God. How do you and God get right? You know, me and God, it's by grace, it's not by works. If you've gone home and said that, you've got it half right. But it's not just about you and God, it's about us and God. It's actually about our corporate identity as Christians, as the Church of Christ, who are together free, who are together under grace, not under law.

Because what happens is, in any group of people, either religion dominates or grace will dominate. And what's happened in the Church in Galatia is that the religious people have started to, to use an analogy from the next chapter, to spread like yeast and distort and pervert the whole community. And their identity is being undermined every day because they're tolerating this kind of religious view of Christianity. What we need to learn is to be defined as a community of grace. To be defined as a group is that we are those for whom are free, for whom Christ died. And in that sense, Paul can use this image of mother, that there is a heavenly Jerusalem of which Holy Trinity is a local expression which is to any individual is like a mother to us and grounds us in the freedom that we have in Christ. That's complicated but we'll come back to that. But it's important to see the point, if you are a true Christian, if you are part of the heavenly Church defined by heavenly grace, then you will have the Church as your mother, the heavenly Jerusalem. Anyway, we'll come back to that.

Paul's got a quote here from the book of Isaiah which is important to him. Verse 27, For it is written in Isaiah, and here's the theme of motherhood, Rejoice you childless one, you who bear no children. Burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pains. For the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married. What's Paul's point? He's saying that there's a real act of faith to be defined as a community of grace. And the Judaizers are saying, if you go with us, you will get more converts.

If you go with us, if you let the Church come to our direction, into the law, we will see more spiritual fruit. We will see more children in this Church, more spiritual children. If you just go with grace, people won't buy it because it's not appealing. It's very appealing to say, you can help yourself get to heaven. That strokes the ego of the religious person. That's an easy way to grow a church. But if you are to trust the grace of God, then you have to sort of go where Sarah failed and just let God bear the fruit. Let God bless it. Let's just trust Jesus in this Church and let's refute anyone who wants to be religious and let them leave. God will bring the blessing. God will bring the blessing. Let's trust the Gospel. Let's just not do what gets bums on seats, but let's trust the Gospel. The message of salvation by grace, it's not easily popular. It's not easily appealing to the world. And you think of all the parts of the Bible that are kind of awkward or even embarrassing for us. Teaching on sexuality, against homosexuality, against sexual autonomy, teaching about Jesus being the only way to God. Even stuff like Noah's Ark and a draft, his head's sticking out of the boat window, judgment day. All this stuff's kind of awkward and hard to explain. We can defend it. But the most difficult teaching in the whole Bible is none of those. The most difficult teaching is you are saved as a free gift and you do nothing to contribute to that. Is that what we believe in this Church?

That's the question. And are we willing to believe it and rebuke people who think that being good is also a way to God? Are we willing to do that? We have to trust God that even if it looks like we'll kind of be childless, trusting in grace, that he will bless it when he is ready. He will bless it when he is ready. And in fact, if you follow along in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah actually peaks with this wonderful image of Jerusalem as mother giving all the blessings of God like a nursing mother with a baby.

[16 : 54] And this is sort of the fulfilment of what Paul's quoting in Isaiah. You go to Isaiah 66. I've got this on a slide. It's very kind of a milky and buxom, booby kind of image. Okay? You're with me?

Very motherly. Rejoice with Jerusalem. Is that it? Yep. And be glad for her, all you who love her, that is who love Jerusalem. And for us, we know Paul takes that to mean the heavenly Jerusalem, the church. Rejoice with her in joy, all you that mourn over her, that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast, that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

Or maybe that should be plural. For thus says the Lord, I will extend prosperity to her like a river and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream. And you shall nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you. You shall be comforted in or by Jerusalem. Here I think is where Paul got his image of the people of God of

Jerusalem as mother. See, what he's saying is there's a time for the people of God when they trust in grace alone, when it's ridiculed and mocked and doesn't make sense to the world and we look weak.

But a time is coming when God will pour and channel great blessing through those, through Jerusalem, through the people of God who teach grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone.

When God pours out his blessing, it will be through mother Jerusalem and we will drink deeply from her bosom and God will pour out great blessing through her. People sometimes quote this as an apparent text that is a female image for God. It's actually not. It's actually saying God will feed, God our Father will feed through our mother Jerusalem and we'll be fed abundantly like a newborn baby that feeds well on its mother's breast. See, friends, there are people who are going to bag you out for trusting Christ alone. And they will bag you out especially when you say, I go to church and I like it and I get encouragement there in Christ alone. I get encouragement there in my Christian freedom. They will tell you church is a waste of time. They will tell you that you're being an idiot. But the promise of scripture is that God's blessing will flow through the heavenly Jerusalem, through the church, through our mother. Now, let me read to you from C.S. Lewis.

[19:35] He picks up on this and he's got this character, an old woman and some people say that she's second sighted. That is, that she's sort of like a witch who can sort of see deep things. And some people say that she's crazy. And you've got to think, who is this woman? And the character in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, this book is a sort of a copy of another Christian book called *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which is an allegory of a man called Christian trying to get to heaven. In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, it's a man called, I think, John, and he's also trying to get to heaven. And to get to the place he wants to get to, there's a massive canyon and he can't climb down. And he's pretty sure he can't climb up again either. And he doesn't really know how to get there, but he's got to cross this canyon.

And this mother, this old lady says to him, you have no chance of getting down the canyon unless I carry you down, unless I carry you down. And he says, well, how could you carry me down? You know, I should carry you down. You're an old lady. And she says, I could do it by the power that the landlord has given me. Now, landlord in the story stands for God, our father. And the man, John says, oh, so do you believe in the landlord as well? And she says, how can I not, dear, when I am his own daughter-in-law? And the name of the old lady is Mother Kirk, Mother Kirk. And Kirk is the Scottish name or another name for church. This character for Lewis is Mother Church. And she's our mother who helps us stay in Christ, who helps us get down the canyon, who helps us get up again. Lewis is saying that you can't make it in the Christian life without mother church, without feeding on mother church. We'll just go a bit further and then I'll summarise because we've got to think more about what do we do in any church when there are religious people who are trying to distort the gospel. Well, here's what Paul says in verse 28.

You, my friends, are children of the promise like Isaac, but just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the spirit, so it is now also.

That is, there was a fair bit of tension between Isaac and Ishmael and Paul focuses here on the fact that Ishmael teased Isaac, that he was older and born first, that kind of thing. And Paul is making the point that Judaizers, religious people, people into goodianity are always going to persecute those who trust in grace alone. They're always going to try and stir us up and get us onto their side and get us to approve them and mock us for trusting Christ alone. And so here's the application. What does the scripture say? And he quotes the Bible, drive out the slave and her child, for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman. So then friends, we are children not of the slave but of the free woman. So our job, if we are to love our mother, to love the church, is to not desert her but defend her from all false gospels. Whether they be false gospels of condoning immorality or pushing morality as the way to God, we are to not desert our mother but drive away every false gospel. And in doing so protect our mother and also in doing so our mother protects us. You see, it's very, I don't know how strongly to put this, you might think I'm heretical. It's very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very difficult to stay true to the grace of Jesus without being part of the church. It's very difficult. I mean, it's hard to stay free in Christ if you cut yourself off from our mother who is free, our mother above who is free. If you sever yourself from her, it's very hard to stay free in Christ. And just to sort of rub this in, I think ultimately you can't do it, you can't do it. I've got a quote here from one of my great, great heroes, greater than C.S. Lewis, John Calvin. It's a

bit of a long one but it's just worth chewing on together as we come to finish. He says, The heavenly Jerusalem which derives its origin from heaven and dwells above by faith is the mother of believers for she has the incorruptible seed of life deposited in her by which she forms us, cherishes us in her womb and brings us to light. She has the milk and the food by which she continually nourishes her offspring. That is why the church is called the mother of believers. And here's the punchline.

[24 : 58] Certainly he who refuses to be a son of the church desires in vain to have God as his father. You see, that's where the logic is heading. To call God father is the great privilege of the gospel.

And that was the first half of chapter 4. But now in the second half of chapter 4, Paul also points out that to have God as father is to have church as mother. And Calvin here in this quote is actually alluding to a famous church father from the 4th century called Cyprian, who was a bishop.

And he said, I don't have this on the board, but he said more bluntly, No one can have God as father who does not have the church as mother. Okay? So that's pretty blunt, isn't it? No one can have God as father who does not have the church as father, at the church as mother. Now, this is not, by the way, a kind of Roman Catholicism. Okay? It's not that.

In fact, by Paul's definition, the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church makes her no church at all because she is not free. The official Roman Catholic teaching makes the blood of Christ insufficient.

It nullifies it by making the sacrifice of the mass the essential ritual. The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church adds, denies Christ by adding other mediators to make Christ insufficient like Mary or the saints that you need to pray through.

[26 : 37] And so this is not a kind of Roman Catholicism. What it is, is a high view of the gospel and a high view of God's church. A high view of God's church. The heavenly gathering of all God's saints, and that's you and me, who are freed by the blood of Christ, saved by the gift of grace. We are all part of this and we ought to cherish being part of the church as mother. And if you don't have, if you're not part of that heavenly church by trusting in Christ alone, then you can't be saved, can you? You can't be because you're not trusting in Christ alone. If you trusted in Christ alone, you would love your mother and therefore, apart from her, there is no salvation. Just remember what Jesus said to Paul on the road to Damascus, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Who was he persecuting? The church. See how highly

Jesus holds the church. How you treat the church is how you treat Jesus. How you honour the church as mother is a reflection of how much you want to honour God as father. And don't just think, Wayne Shuler is just a pastor, therefore he's like, you know, promoting the church or whatever because it's my job. It's actually the other way around in my heart. I'm a pastor because I love the church first. Does that make sense? I'm a pastor because I love the church and I love the church because I love Jesus and I love salvation through him alone and I love God as my father who has by grace given me the church to be part of. If you think you know the gospel well and yet you're uncomfortable being affectionate about the church or uncomfortable with showing real unconditional commitment to the church, then you need to check whether you really know the gospel.

You see, you need to check whether you really know the gospel because the church is where the gospel milk is provided in abundance for all those who will drink. So whatever happens, you have to have a mother. You have to have a spiritual mother and it's either going to be one of slavery or one of freedom, like a Hagar or like a Sarah. And I want to challenge you to be part of this community who are a community that cherish the freedom that Jesus gives. And we will guard the freedom that Jesus gives. We will guard it against slavery to sin and we will guard it against slavery to good works and to works righteousness. Paul says, drive out the slave woman and embrace the Jerusalem that is free.

She is our mother. Let me pray for us. Dear Lord God, we praise you so much for the privilege of being part of this church, Holy Trinity. We thank you that this is and can and should be a place where we drive out false gospels and we embrace Christian freedom. And thank you, Father, that you have, by the blood of Christ, given us this church to be like a mother to us. And so, Father, I pray that we will honour you, pray that we will honour Jesus and honour his blood and I pray that we will honour the church for whom Christ died. Amen.