

## **“The Show Down at the Dinner Party”**

Galatians 2:11-14, 19-21

*Series: The Key to Be Free – Week 2. Freedom from Pleasing People*

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Ralph Thraen was a quiet man. Raised in Iowa by good German farmers, he was hard working, honorable and always on time. Ralph Thraen was the youngest boy of fourteen children and the father of seven children. He was a man of few words - probably because he couldn't get a word in edgewise. He was loyal. He worked for the same company – Ford – for thirty six years. He was also my father-in-law.

And I was scared of him. At least at first.

For the four and half years I dated Lisa the only thing I remember him saying to me was, “Do you want more green beans?” I had reason to be afraid. Ralph Thraen fought in World War II reaching the rank of Second Lieutenant. He hit the beaches of Normandy not long after D-Day. He was in the tank destroyers division. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He served under General Patton. Blood and Guts Patton. On June 2, 1982 I planned to ask his permission to marry his daughter.

I didn't stand a chance. I feared “The BIG Question.” Will you raise the children Protestant or Catholic? You see, the Catholic Church meant everything to Lisa's parents. My father-in-law attended Mass every day before work. His faith in Jesus was deep and sincere. They also knew I was planning to be a Presbyterian minister. It was the BIG Question – the one I feared, the one we never discussed.

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> I sat down at the kitchen table while Lisa and her parents finished their dinner. Since I was nervous, I stalled. Before I could get the words out, Ralph picked up his coffee and dessert and went upstairs to do what he always did at that hour – watching Family Feud. Not a good sign. Lisa asked him to come back down and I finally got up the courage. “Mr. and Mrs. Thraen, may I have your blessing to marry your daughter?” Lisa's Mom had tears in her eyes. Her Dad said, “Yes.” A huge weight fell off my shoulders. Her Dad brought out glasses and a special liqueur for a toast. Just as I took a sip, he said, “Now for the BIG Question.” I gagged. Thank God I didn't spray my drink all over the table. Trembling I asked, “What BIG Question is that?” He held up the bottle of liqueur and said, “Where do you think they make this stuff?”

That night I think I lost my first hair.

Let me finish the story – my in-laws never let denominations come between us. We were married in a Catholic church by their priest and my pastor. My mother-in-law attended my graduation from Princeton Seminary and their whole family came to my ordination and the baptisms of our children. I think the real BIG Question was, “Will you love and care for our daughter?” A year later, in the presence of God, my in laws and all our family and friends I answered, “I will and I do.”

I wanted to please my in-laws. Would they accept me? Would they want me in their family? One of the BIG Questions of life is: “Are you pleased with me? What do I have to do to make you happy?” Why do we work so hard to please people? It can be a full time job. Last week we looked at why we control one another. We have goals and we become controlling when we force others to follow our goals. This happens when Fear turns our goals into our gods.

One of the most powerful goals is people pleasing. From the beginning we are trained to please. “Smile for mommy.” “Roll over for daddy.” “Take a step for grandma.” “You have to play better if you want to make the team.” “You won’t get into that college if you don’t pick up your grades.” You have to change your image if you want to get a date or find a mate, have more friends or keep up with the trends. You have to work harder if you plan to stay with this firm.

We’ve been so well trained to please people it’s hard to stop. “What do you think of my work?” “How did you like my performance?” “How do I look?” “Does this dress make me look fat?” (Guys - Don’t ever answer that one). “What are they saying behind my back?” “Why don’t they like me?” “What do they think of me?” A wise person said: “You wouldn’t worry about what people think of you if you realized how little they do.”

But we do worry. So many say to me, “I feel I’m on the outside. I don’t fit in. I don’t belong.” So we work harder to please others. Our self-worth is defined by what they think. We keep trying to make everyone happy until people pleasing becomes a prison. And we think the toughest person to please is the Ultimate Person: God.

Paul once thought the best way to please God is to persecute unbelievers. There is something wrong when you think the only way to make God happy is to hurt others. On the road to Damascus, Paul found out he was wrong. In the same moment he discovered God is unconditionally in love with him. That’s Grace – God is already pleased with you. We don’t deserve it. We can’t earn it. We don’t have to. The word “Grace” means “Gift.” Grace is God’s free gift of love. If God is pleased with a persecutor like Paul, he is pleased with you. “That could go to your head.” I hope it does - and to your heart and soul. God’s in love with you. When you believe He is unconditionally pleased with you, you can be free of the prison of people pleasing.

Once Paul realizes God is pleased with him, he stops trying to please others.

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. Galatians 1:10

Even super saints like Peter find it hard to break free from people pleasing. Watch what happens at a dinner party in Antioch.

When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the

circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. Galatians 2:11-13

The division at this dinner is not between Catholics and Protestants but between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus already showed Peter God wants to save both. Peter is the first one to welcome a Gentile, the Roman soldier Cornelius, into the Church (Acts 10). Peter and Paul firmly believe Gentiles are welcomed as equals in the Church. They do not have to become Jews first before they can follow Jesus. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus are all having a wonderful dinner party in Antioch.

Then it all falls apart. When a delegation of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem arrives they must have frowned on Jews and Gentiles eating together. To please them, Peter leaves the meal. This starts a chain-reaction. Other Jewish Christians follow him. Even Barnabas, Paul's friend and preacher to the Gentiles, leaves the table. The old walls go up. Their silent departure shouts to the Gentiles believers: you are unclean and unacceptable to God. God is not pleased with you. It is like Protestants saying to Catholics "You're not welcome here," like Southerners saying, "This is a whites only lunch counter." What will Paul do? Fall in line and please Peter and the people from headquarters? Paul rises from his seat at the table.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? Galatians 2:14

It's a face off. Paul against Peter. A showdown at the dinner party. The truth of the gospel is at stake. Their actions say, "God is not pleased with you if you don't first follow the Law." Grace is on the line. Why did Peter do it? He was trying to please people, not God. Paul didn't cave in. How do we stay free from the prison of people pleasing?

First, **Put People Pleasing to Death.** Paul writes

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. (Galatians 2:19)

The Law was Paul's life. To break free he didn't slowly wean himself off of it. It's like someone coming off an addiction. He entirely stopped his attempts to please God and people through the Law. This addiction had to die if was going to live for God. Death is a sudden stop. Every time I officiate at a funeral there is an end. In this case it's not the end of life but the end of a lifestyle. If you are always trying to please people, always bending over backwards, always walking on egg shells, always trying to make people happy – STOP! That lifestyle has to die.

Why? When you are addicted to pleasing people, you make them an idol. They take God's place in your life. The Law became an idol in Paul's life. That's why his legalistic lifestyle had to die. The only person you need to please is Jesus and He's already unconditionally pleased with you. Let today be the funeral for your old way of life. Decide today to let people pleasing die.

Then **Identify with Christ.**

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (Galatians 2:20).

We all know Jesus died for us. He took our place on the Cross. He paid the price for our sin. He suffered the punishment we deserve. That's why our salvation is possible. That is God's gift of Grace. Yet Jesus doesn't just take our place on the Cross. When we accept His gift of Grace, He takes our place inside us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus takes up residence in us. He lives in us. In Greek the letter "I" is a three letter word: EGO. Now substitute that word into the above verse.

My EGO has been crucified with Christ and My EGO no longer lives, but Christ lives in me.

When Jesus comes in, selfishness dies, ego dies. You can't be self-centered with Jesus at the center. People pleasing, like all bad habits, will not go away all at once. Like all bad habits and addictions, we daily put it to death, pick up our Cross and follow Jesus. We daily put to death selfishness, anger, resentment, self-pity, laziness, pride and worry. And as we do, we make more room for Jesus. Christian author Anne Lamott says, "God can't clean the house of you when you're still in it."<sup>1</sup> Let Jesus move in and do some daily housecleaning in your soul.

### Finally, **Live to Love**

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

Faith is putting your life in Jesus' hands. We all put our lives in the hands of someone or something. It might be your culture or corporation, the media or money, peer pressure or a powerful person in your life. Why should you trust Jesus? He loved you and gave himself for you. On the Cross He proved, without a shadow of doubt, that He loves you and is pleased with you. He gives that love to every person on the planet whether they receive it or not. And when you live by faith in Him, you don't have to please other people. Instead do what He did: love them. We please people to get something from them. Jesus loves people. He gives unconditional love and lets it go. This week, give the gift of love without trying to get something back. Let Jesus love them through you.

Like my father-in-law Ralph Thraen, Brennan Manning is a devout Catholic who knew the horrors of war. He shares this story of how he received his name "Brennan." His best friend growing up was named Ray. They did everything together: went to the same school, bought a car together, even double-dated. They enlisted in the Army together, suffered through boot camp and fought on the frontlines of the Korean War.

One night, hunkered down in a foxhole, Brennan and Ray were eating chocolate bars and talking about the old times back in Brooklyn. Their memories were interrupted when a live grenade landed in their trench. Ray smiled at Brennan, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, yet sparing Brennan.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Grace Eventually* (Riverhead Trade, 2008), p. 235

Years later, when Brennan felt called to become a priest, he was told to take a saint's name. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So Richard Francis Xavier Manning became Father Brennan Manning. He took the identity of his savior in the trench. After some time he visited Ray's mother in Brooklyn. Sitting at the table one night, Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up from her seat, shook her finger in Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?" Brennan said at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the Cross of Jesus wondering, "Does the Son of God really love me?" and Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?"<sup>2</sup>

You ask, "Does God really love me? Is God pleased with me?"

What more does He have to do to prove it to you?

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<sup>2</sup> adapted from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (IVP, 2009), p. 142