

*Essential Faith*  
Galatians 2:17-20

My dog Lola is a recent Puppy Kindergarten drop-out. But before we got distracted with other things and stopped going to those Saturday morning classes, we learned several things. She learned how to lie down on command. I learned about the value of treats. Training treats—little pieces of food that come in a variety of shapes, sizes and flavors. Treats are apparently the key to appropriate dog behavior. I had no idea that this is such a well-developed concept. I learned that there are low-value treats for beginning obedience skills and high-value treats for getting your dog's attention when there are competing attractions, like cars or other dogs across the street. Now I have a whole supply of tiny little manufactured pieces of food that are the shape and color of rib-eye steaks (and maybe taste too—I have no idea), which are definitely high value treats.

But I also learned that a dog owner not only has to have the treats in your possession; you have to know how to use them. For optimal obedience training, a dog treat should be used not as a *lure* for good behavior, but only as a *reward*. This is very important—you don't want your dog to obey *only* when there's when there's food in your hand; you want him to think there might be food at any time! (I actually knew this—one of the dogs my family had when I was a child responded *only* to the word “cookie”.) So, the treats are supposed to stay completely hidden in one hand, while you give the dog instructions with the other hand. Pretty complicated. I'm not saying *why* Lola decided to drop out of puppy kindergarten, but you can see why it seemed much more relaxing to be at home working on my sermon.

It's not just dogs that learn to respond by way of rewards and incentives. It's what people learn at many points in our lives. From the use of M&M's to train children out of diapers, to stars in elementary school and grades in college, we have—all of us—learned what it means to work for the promise of a reward. Whether it is nature or nurture that puts it there, it's a life skill, an expectation about the way life works. If you stay in school, you'll get a good job. If you work hard and invest conscientiously, you'll always be able to take care of yourself financially. If you are good to other people, they'll be good to you. If you use your credit card, you get frequent flyer miles.

And because it's the way we expect things to work in our life with other humans, it's also the way people have always thought about our relationship with God. That there are rules which must be followed, and that the reward for following them is God's favor. That the promise of that favored treatment, or the threat of missing it, is enough to make us choose doing the right thing, to follow the rules, or the law. We see this idea working all through the Jewish tradition that Jesus grew up in and that we as his followers have inherited. With the Ten Commandments and the whole set of laws that surrounded those commandments came the expectation that compliance would bring reward and that disobedience would bring punishment. That you could—all of us could—earn God's favor by *being good*. That the more we can do to make ourselves good, the more we please God, and the more we can be sure of avoiding bad things happening to us.

The first generations of Christians focused their attention on the ways of being good that had been identified in the Jewish tradition: keeping the Sabbath, the requirement of circumcision, obeying the regulations about which foods were pure and which were not. Those are the kinds of sins Paul was referring to in the passage we read this morning. Later, the Christian tradition developed its own rules

about what it meant to be good enough to get God's rewards—about going to church, or praying the right way, or believing in the right formula.

Often the rewards were not something that you'd expect in this life, but in the next. Heaven or hell, depending on which one you deserve. In the form of Christianity that we practice mostly around this church, we tend not to talk so much about the incentive of reward after death, as some other Christian traditions have done. We're not so worried about what will happen to us after we've had a long and satisfying life, the kind of life good medicine and healthy habits can help us anticipate for ourselves. But I think the expectation of reward is still there for most of us, in some less obvious ways. The expectation that if we can make ourselves good enough—do the right things, believe the right way, serve others as much as Jesus did—God will hold out to us the things that we crave most of all, the treats that only God seems to be holding. Peace. Joy. Healing. Protection. Relief from our anxiety, or depression, or fear.

And if those things do not come, we think something has not “worked”.

You're right, Paul is saying in his letter to the Galatians. Being good doesn't work because being good—however you define it—is not what God is interested in “getting” from you. The way God loves us is not a system of reward and punishment. Faith is about something else. Listen again to Paul's words that we read a few minutes ago:

“I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a “law person” so that I could be God's person. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, *and I am no longer driven to impress even God*. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not “mine,” but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

In the words of what may be a more familiar translation to you: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

So what does that mean? This is hard for us, because it's not a *doing* thing. It's hard to get your arms around. Admiring Jesus' willingness to be compassionate and self-sacrificial is one thing. Modeling our lives after the stories about him that we read and have heard from the Bible is something you can aspire to. But what would it mean to say, with Paul, “Christ *lives* in me”?

I hope you won't simply dismiss that thought as evangelical excess or one of those ways that you and God part company with Paul. Because I think what Paul is saying in this passage is very much the same as what Jesus said to his disciples when he told them that the way he wanted them to remember him was by *eating*—taking into their *stomachs*(!)—the bread and wine that symbolized his life, rather than studying some treatise he had written. I think it's what he meant when he said, “You must take up your cross and die with me, every day, so that you can be born again.” He was saying, in a way, *Live your life in the metaphor of my life*. Live as though it's *me* alive inside of you, in conversation with your thoughts, stretching your heart out into unfamiliar shapes, steering your feet toward places you'd never choose to go on your own. It's what those first disciples experienced for themselves when they described that first Pentecost, what it felt like to be filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with power they didn't even know they had inside of them.

This idea that God is not a judge, or an out-there object of your admiration, but a living presence inside of you, is a spiritual notion. It's not concrete, and not something that we can grasp easily. People have always struggled with the idea, and that's why there have been a lot of lame attempts to turn what is mystical into three easy steps or four spiritual laws. It's the work of our spiritual lives to understand what it means, when everything inside of us keeps wanting to turn faith back into a predictable set of requirements and rewards, a checklist of items that we can measure to see if we're doing it right.

In my experience, the path is often unmarked. It's easy to lose hold of the feelings we look for as rewards, or to tell us that we have earned God's approval. I think that when Paul said he'd been *crucified* with Christ, he probably meant that it didn't feel good all the time. What it does mean is that little by little, the more your life gets filled up with God-space, seeing the world through God's eyes, caring for other people the way God cares for them, the less room there is for your own ego, your own need for treats and rewards. Our ego and self-centeredness gets whittled down to its right size, a little bit at a time. It doesn't happen all at once. It's the effect of a lifetime journey of faith.

So forget about trying to make yourself a good person. That's the work of the God who is quite at home living inside of you. The God who has loved you all along—long before you did anything to deserve it. Changing you—making you good from the inside out—is God's work, and it's work that God is perfectly capable of doing well. Our work is simply to cooperate—by creating more space inside of us where God can live, by clearing out all that clutter that gets in the way: our fears, our anxiety, our need for a constant stream of rewards.

Trusting God to do this work inside of us, trusting God to *want* it for us, is what faith is. And it is enough.