

Come, Labor On

Text: Galatians 6 ESV

Here Come the Holidays

This Thursday is Thanksgiving. For some families, gathering together is a breeze: everyone loves each other and gets along fine. Boundaries are respected, communications are clear, and old bygones remain “by & gone.” But perhaps *you* come from a family that is a bit more complicated than that.

Uncle Chad will be there wearing his MAGA cap, and everything that has made him difficult over the past decade has now been blessed by a voter mandate election cycle. Will he be *cool* about it? Uncle Chad? Are you kidding? He will arrive in full-on gloat mode, full-to-overflowing with “I told you so”s and eager to demonstrate how right he’s been all along. He is physically large and loud, and his voice will come booming over the top of anyone else expressing—however gently—an opinion outside of his bubble. He’s also a rabid Chicago Bears fan, though he’s never been there. But that’s just the way he is, Uncle Chad.

Sasha will also be there. Sasha—his niece and yours—Sasha is hard woke, presently trying to finish her doctoral thesis entitled, “Gender Fluidity Repression and Colonial Exploitation.” She’s arguing that Christopher Columbus’ mistreatment of indigenous Caribbean populations resulted from the fact that he suffered gender dysphoria with no option for

transitioning. And she’s completely *serious*. She’s also a hard vegan, disapproving of any animal-exploitative products in the house, which includes everything made of leather—that’s *most* of your furniture—and about 90% of the Thanksgiving meal. Though, unlike her Uncle Chad, she is demure and non-confrontational, she will subtly draw all attention to herself at every opportunity. At the first sight of the big, brown, roast turkey, she lowers her head and covers her eyes, and will sit sadly forking her way through unbuttered mashed potatoes and peas. In her own way, she dominates the mood every bit as much as Uncle Chad.

Here’s the thing: this is a loving family—everyone in this family agrees about love—they all believe in the value of love and that their family is built upon love, but in some families it’s just a harder job than in others. Which can be *good!* *Good* because only in a *difficult* family do you have a real opportunity to grow into more mature, more completely selfless *Christian* love—that is, loving people who are difficult for you to love.

It may help to know that Uncle Chad deeply *loves* his niece Sasha. Chad never married, but totally doted upon all his nieces and nephews. Took them all to Disneyland each year, spending hundreds of dollars he didn’t have to spare, spoiling them with their hearts’ delights—Mickey

meals from morning till night, all the big E-rides, bags of souvenirs, and Donald Duck baseball caps that quack when you squeeze the bill. But these days, Uncle Chad feels distanced from his niece Sasha and *despises* the popular woke culture she inhabits—at least what he understands of it from listening to podcasts, which he seems to do an awful lot. He loves his niece but thinks she’s been brainwashed by elitists who’ve never done an honest day’s work in their lives.

And Sasha *loves* her Uncle Chad. He—like her parents—was good to her and made her feel happy, secure, special, and loved. But as she grew and studied, she came to think of his ideas and worldview as self-serving—patriarchal, uninformed, exploitative, and entrenched in past assumptions that create pain for people historically, and in the present. She loves him but thinks he’s woefully unenlightened.

So how can we—if we imagine ourselves to be the other family members—help Uncle Chad and niece Sasha restore their mutual affection?

Like I said, that may not be *your* family, but it is a lot of families.

Marriage & Family

And isn’t it funny how in Scripture, marriage and family tend to be the basic God-given models for describing, learning, and expressing love? The covenant between God and Israel is like a marriage covenant—Israel being the unfaithful wife through idolatry. The gospels speak of the church as the bride of Christ, and Christ the bridegroom who goes to prepare a place and will return to take us with him to the marriage feast. Marriage is the central image in both old and new testaments to describe the relationship between God and His chosen people. And the most sacred relationship in the cosmos—the inner nature of the Trinity, is in part described as a Father/Son

relationship—with the further promise that we shall be made “sons” (and daughters).

Marriage and family are not just arbitrary social arrangements—they are living metaphors for how we relate to Almighty God.

The thing is: we don’t *choose* our families. Parents can’t choose their children (unless they adopt). Like Forrest Gump says: life is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you’re going to get. That’s true for families as well. But family life is the natural school wherein we learn to love. We are loved by our mother and father and we learn to reflect that love and grow it out into a capacity to love our siblings, cousins, and neighbors.

Love is sometimes easy and we love it when it is. When loving another is easy, we feel we get more than we give, and these are our most feeding relationships. But it doesn’t *have* to be easy because love loves through difficulty, and the quality of love that conquers difficulty is superior to love that is easy.

To love when it is difficult for us is the better lesson—the superior adventure—to ease and effortlessness.

The great G.K. Chesterton, commenting on character—the capacity to love—says this:

“The best way that man could test his readiness to encounter the common variety of mankind would be to climb down a chimney into any house at random, and get on as well as possible with the people inside. And that is essentially what each one of us did on the day that he was born.” (From *Heretics*)

What an image—we are all dropped into the lives of others: our parents, our siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles—and it is our test of character to get along with them.

This is why we are here—to learn the lessons of love and to learn to love through difficulty and disagreement.

Restoration is a Process

The purpose of Paul’s letter to the Galatians was to address a family conflict. In Galatia, Uncle Chad and Sasha refused to sit at the same table, separated as they were by different worldviews. Worldviews are like templates—plastic colored screens through which we view the world. It might have holes cut into it to allow light to come through here or there, but it blocks some things and allows others through. The whole template may be tinted pink, or blue, or red. Your worldview probably determines which news network you prefer.

Paul tells us the Church is to respect neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, which is to say Christians should hold little stake in identity politics of any kind. We hold that pride is the number one deadly sin—we shouldn’t celebrate pride as much as we should reform and correct it. We live by love, not pride. We are the *anti*-pride party, and that’s nothing to be proud of.

Paul repeatedly attacks the Jewish pride that reasserted itself in the Galatian church. No one can serve two masters. We either serve The Law of Moses *OR* we serve the new life in the Spirit through Christ. T

Paul stands neither with Uncle Chad nor with Sasha. Paul tells Uncle Chad to relax a bit and focus on becoming peaceable, patient, kind, gentle, and good-hearted. Similarly, Paul tells Sasha to lighten up on her judgmentalism—abandon her codes and legalisms and focus instead on love, mercy, patience, and kindness.

Both Chad and Sasha have allowed their *worldviews* to get in the way of their life’s true soul work, which is to live love and learn love.

Disagreements are no obstacles to love, because it is virtually impossible for two people to disagree about absolutely everything. They can always find *something* in common and choose to focus on that.

We can have disagreements and still practice perfect love. Even where there have been major transgressions, people can be restored. Christ commands this when he tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Paul tells us to “restore them in gentleness.”

So how do we restore the transgressors? Or how are *we* restored when we’ve transgressed against others? I don’t believe it is automatic, but a *process* that is worth our every effort.

In short, that process is one of confession, repentance, and forgiveness. Our church forefathers boiled it down to a formula:

THE PROCESS OF RESTORATION

CONTRITION — Sorrow over Sin
+ CONFESSION — Naming the Sin
+ SATISFACTION — Making amends

ABSOLUTION — Grace, Peace, and Holy Forgetting

It obviously requires a good deal of soul searching before restoration can be complete.

I believe gratitude is the key to the process.

Happiness = Gratitude

I’ll put it briefly: I am becoming convinced that there is no meaningful difference between the words happy and grateful. Happiness and gratitude are interchangeable words.

What does it mean to feel happy other than that you are in a state of contentment—things are good, and you have an awareness that they're good?

I guess you can say that it is possible to be unconsciously happy—that is, trouble-free and easy-going, all while taking it for granted—but that doesn't last, does it?

Happiness has a way of awakening us to its presence, and the moment we become self-aware that we're feeling happy it all turns to gratitude. You and I know Whom to thank for our blessings, so our happiness is wrapped up in giving our thanks—all thanks—to God.

When we are thankful, we are content. Gratitude feels like happiness.

The more grateful we become, the happier we feel.

When I was a pastor on staff in Edmond, Oklahoma, one sweet-hearted woman modeled that combination of happiness and gratitude. She was famous for saying, "That was the best sermon I've ever heard!" She said this with complete conviction and honesty.

We, the pastors on staff, used to joke about it: "Well yeah, she told you that yesterday's sermon was the best she's ever heard, but I'm preaching this Sunday, and I'll bet she'll say it was better than yours."

Sure enough, that Sunday's sermon was "the best sermon she ever heard."

As I remember her—and I do so with great fondness—I know she was happier than just about anyone I knew. That's where I made the connection. Think of it: if the present sermon you're hearing is always the best sermon you've ever heard, how great would your life feel? How happy would you feel if you could tell others that every day you wake up seems to be the best day ever?

The key to happiness is simply this: that we would be deeply grateful in every day for every blessing. We are wisest when we take every day and every adventure as a gift from our Loving Heavenly Father, and we know we belong here because He wants us here. That is more than mere contentment; it is Joy. It is also peace. It makes patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control easy to manage.

Gratitude makes loving others easier—it even heals broken hearts and enables us to love and forgive our enemies.

Happiness is gratitude.

Let us remember Uncle Chad and Sasha this week, and let's pray that they find a way to locate themselves in gratitude for one another. When they remember how good God has been to put them together—to have dropped them down the same family chimney—perhaps that gratitude will increase...

...and all those things that separate them—those opposing worldviews—will crack, crumble, and fall away like old scales, and they just won't matter anymore.

As we prepare our Thanksgiving tables this week, let us remember to prepare our hearts as well. Let us seek to be grateful for all things and seek to grow in gratitude every day of our lives.

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A Few Questions to Aid Digestion

1. What makes our families the natural school for learning how to love?
2. What are some ways we can help make love overcome disagreements?
3. What kind of things are involved in the process of restoration following transgression?
4. What temptations can still blindside Spirit-led people?
5. What is the "good" we are not to grow tired of doing?
6. What is the difference between happiness and gratitude?
7. Name 3, then 5, then 10 or more things for which you are thankful.