



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“Of God”*

*Galatians 5:16-26*

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Galatians 5:16-26

<sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

“A Boy Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.”

That is called the “Boy Scout Law” but sounds more like a “Boy Scout List,” a list of attributes that describe the ideal scout. The *ideal* scout. Honestly, the list has to be aspirational since those first describing themselves that way are 11-year-old boys... and now 11-year-old girls as well. I was a barefoot, 11-year-old Alabama boy who had the run of the neighborhood when I first memorized and recited that list. You can bet that I wasn’t living up to everything I said I was, and you can begin with the word “clean.”



I want to talk about a hymn that is *not* meant to be aspirational, for it gives a list that describes the ideal God. I messed up when I chose hymns for this service, because I wanted us to sing as our opening hymn, *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*. Only when it came time to give that information to Andrea for the bulletin, I forgot I had made this decision. It's too bad I forgot because that hymn is a lot of fun to sing. It may not be as popular a worship-starter as *Holy, Holy, Holy*, or *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, but Presbyterians who like getting worship going with some power and zip never mind singing this one.

I tell you what, let's sing it now. Open your *Glory to God* hymnals to #12. I have learned that this hymn is most fun to sing when a crowd sings it with gusto. The tune is easy to follow and thus makes even a poor singer like me feel like I'm singing in some great church choir.

Let's sing the first verse listening for the answers to this question, "Who is this God we have come to worship?"

(Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.)

"Who is God?" I asked.

You sang that God is  
"Immortal, invisible, only wise.  
In light, inaccessible hid from our eyes."

"Really? Tell me more."

If you sang verse two you would add:  
"Well, God is unresting, unchanging, and silent as light.  
God is not wanting, nor wasting, but rulest in might."

It didn't feel right singing that hymn seated, did it? The hymn makes you want to stand up, rise toward the mountain peaks and clouds that are in the lyrics, standing, stretching toward heaven... up, up, up from mess, from sin, from decay, from imperfection... up, up, up toward the God... who is too high to reach.

For that's the point of the hymn isn't it? We can stand and sing, but we can't ascend and see. The attributes the hymn uses to describe God describe the indescribable: immortal, invisible, inaccessible, pure light. The hymn humbles us by reminding us we are mortals who in the span of a life flourish with youth and then wither with age, but God never changes.

I love the hymn, but it appeals more to my philosophy-major-self than my seminary-trained-self. It leans Platonic. By that I mean that the text reflects Plato's insistence that anything divine must be unspoiled by anything that is human or of the world. God to be God must be perfect. God must be pure, pristine—free of the smell and stain of human sin and human flaws.



That is why I think that this hymn which *makes us want to stand up*, is a hymn that *cannot stand alone*. For what is described is a God we cannot hold (that's true) but it doesn't give us a strong sense that we worship a God who holds us. We sing of a God frozen in unchanging perfection, and it is hard to imagine being seen and understood... in our sin, even in our need for growth. This is not a hymn that promises a Spirit to move us away from our regret and toward our being forgiven or our need to forgive—move us toward change—maybe move us from the valley in which we might find ourselves and guiding us to a better place.

I don't mean to suggest that the hymn isn't biblical. Oh, it is biblical. It makes one of the Bible's first and most repeated points. At the beginning in Genesis we are told—and we are told over and over again all the way through to Revelation—that God *is* beyond our sight, our reach, and our control. God is the voice of the bush that burns but is not consumed, the God who refuses to be named at the bush except to be called something like “Presence” or “Being.” “**My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways,**” says Isaiah on behalf of God. And poor Job, suffering calamities that are not his fault, asks God over and over again to be more transparent. “Why?” he asks. He finally is given an audience, but not an answer. He is given only a glimpse of all that God can see from the heavens; a glimpse that reminds him that reality doesn't begin and end with Job. Job comes away from that vision without answers... only with awe.

*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise* is more a Hymn of Awe than it is a Hymn of Praise.

But once we realize that before God our silence is more eloquent than our words—once we realize that God is beyond our sight, and certainly beyond our descriptions—what then? I mean, even if true faith is not about defining God, it is about living together as God would want us to live, right? Because it is simply not enough to say, “**God is a mystery.**” I say that all the time, because guess what? **God is a mystery.** But there is far too much potential to do great harm or great good in this world to be happy with a shoulder-shrugging, “Whatever works,” kind of faith.

Here are some examples of today's shoulder-shrugging, “Whatever works,” kind of faiths:

It is popular these days to say that since God is a mystery, let's accept that everyone has the right to believe in whatever god makes sense to them. “**There are many paths to God, and as long as no one is being harmed, who is to say one's spiritual path is better than another's?**”

Here's another one: God is the Unmoved Mover, the one who winds up the clock of creation and then sits back and watches it tick, tick, tick right on through black holes, dinosaurs dying, species evolving, and civilizations rising and falling.

Here is one more: Some simply can't talk themselves out of believing there's a God. Their minds tell them that there can't be a world without a maker, a creation without a creator. Their hearts tell them that if faith was good enough for their parents and grandparents, who they love, then it is good enough for them. So, if Christian, they'll come to church for Christmas and Easter, for funerals and weddings, and they'll have their children baptized. But when it comes to daily life in the house, or on the streets, or on social media, or in their participation in community and national life, their faith really doesn't come much into play.

All three faiths could sing of a God who is out there—unknowable, unreachable, and as far as they experience life, uninvolved. But while these faiths are very indulgent and inclusive, they are



not of much use. For once the point is made that we can't define God, a question remains, "[How then are we to live together?](#)"

At least that's the Bible's perspective. From the Bible's perspective, too much is at stake to shrug our shoulders about God. What is at stake is human dignity, justice and compassion among us, and care of the creation which we are charged to take care of. The Bible makes the repeated point that God is beyond our reach, but that we are not out of God's reach. We who are created are also called to live in a way that has been shown to us through Israel's story and Jesus' life.

I suggest to you that though we can't describe God, we can describe what is of God... what is godly. While we cannot describe God as a human in heaven, we can gain insight from scripture of what God expects of humans.

I am going to call on Paul, the author of our New Testament passage from Galatians, to help us. And to help us understand Paul, I am going to call on a Jewish rabbi. Rabbi Harold Schulweis died recently, but I think he would be pleased being asked as a Jew to help us understand how to be more authentically Christian. This California rabbi began an organization with a name I cannot pronounce. What this Jewish organization does is identify Gentiles who demonstrated simple goodness by helping others, and who are now themselves in need. Today, through this organization, there are over 805 Gentiles in 23 countries who are cared for by Jews as a way of saying "[Thank you for demonstrating simple goodness...](#)," a way of saying, "[We can't see God, but we can see God in you.](#)"<sup>1</sup>

Amazing. "[We can't see God, but we can see God in you.](#)" That is almost a paraphrase of what is said about Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. "[No one has ever seen God,](#)" John tells us. "[But in God's only son, who is close to the Father's heart, he has made him known.](#)" We may not be able to describe God in heaven, but we can recognize something of what is godly in the words, life and death of Jesus.

Rabbi Schulweis was so convinced that we cannot see God that he wouldn't even say that "[God is just,](#)" "[God is merciful,](#)" or "[God is compassion.](#)" I find ways to say those things, but he couldn't. But what the rabbi did say is that based on our long history with God, we know that as far as being human is concerned, God expects justice, and mercy, and compassion.

That is what Paul is doing in our passage from Galatians. We who are followers of the God we encounter in Jesus Christ should at least agree on some ways to behave. After we have come to know Israel's whole story, and after we have come to know Jesus, some behaviors do not... uh... smell right. We can say that lying is not of God. Selfish behavior is not of God. Remaining willfully ignorant of the needs of others, treating others as objects or as means to our own selfish ends—whether for sex, or wealth, or power—is not of God. Paul says it is of the flesh, but that's confusing. Let's just say, that whatever debates we might have about God, there should be no debate about ugly, divisive, violent behavior—any behavior that unnecessarily degrades community or degrades human dignity. Whatever advantages such behavior brings, they are not of God.

Paul is not being the philosopher talking theoretically in the hopes that one day, some folks in Roanoke Virginia might read what he writes and learn a thing or two. No, he is talking to

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<sup>1</sup> The organization is called [Hakarat HaTov](#).



specific communities and he is telling them to behave. He is talking to members of Galatian Churches. He finds some of the ways they deal with each other to be unacceptable; so much controversy among them—so much strife. He sees a kind of self-righteous competition with the aim of one side winning and the other side not only losing but being humiliated. We don't know all that was stirring the Galatians up, and I won't go into all that we do know, but it involves sex, it involves money, and it involves very spirited disputes about what rules to follow in order to be a Christian—rules about circumcision, diet, worship.

We know that Paul has his own views on these issues, and he expresses them in his letter. Don't get him started about circumcision unless you have lots of time on your hands. But though Paul is passionate about a lot of issues, in our passage he cuts to the chase. “Listen to me,” Paul says. “At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if you have the better answers in family or community debates. If you are unkind, you are not of God. If you are lying, you are not of God. If you are arrogant, or purposefully hurtful, or divisive only in order to win, you are not of God. It is not in the spirit of God to be untruthful, to hate, to hurt others, to destroy the community so only one part of it can have all that it wants.”

I advise couples in premarital counseling to work on disagreeing well; learn how to argue well. For even if one of them is right, if one wins in a way that degrades and shows disrespect, they have will have bigger issues in their marriage than what they were arguing about.

After talking about what is not of God, Paul goes on to talk about what *is* of God. The phrase he uses is, “of the Spirit.” He gives a list of attributes that may not be exhaustive for all Christians everywhere and in every age but is a list those Galatians need to hear. “What is of the Spirit of God is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—gifts of the Spirit that protect relationships, heal relational wounds, allow people who are different and at odds to remain in the same families and communities; gifts that bring about the compromise and forbearance that families and communities need to make it through hard and thorny times without falling apart.”

Paul may not be describing God, but he's being pretty explicit in describing what God expects of the Galatian Christians. He didn't come up with this stuff by ascending to the heavens, but by observing what happens when God comes among us on earth, and among us through Jesus.

A faith without this kind of moral clarity about how we treat each other is not a faith that can heal the world, no matter how intellectually satisfying. I think that rude and abusive ways of treating each other is becoming acceptable in our culture (though, thank God, not that I can see within this church). What Paul is doing is reminding us of what we already pretty much know: We who bear the name of Jesus Christ have a standard by which we can begin to judge what is of God.

Trolling others for the fun of upsetting them. Is that of God?

Being kind when others are being cruel. Of God?

Delighting in the ways of war instead of peace? Of God?

Telling the truth when others get away with lying? Of God?

Life remains difficult, and there are complex and thorny problems we have to face in our life together. We will have debates about spending money and time at home, issues about love and



affection; and out in the community we'll have debates about crime, poverty, welfare... or guns, taxes, healthcare... And some of the solutions and compromises we come up with won't work... and probably none ever completely work. But in the middle of it all, Paul left us with this cut-to-the-chase reminder: there are ways we treat each other in the middle of it all that are of God and some that are not. Though his lists are not exhaustive, it wouldn't harm us to memorize the *Fruits of the Spirit* list he made for the Galatians... and aspire to live it.

