

Lies of Little Gods: Who Are You Trying to Impress?

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Galatians 1:6-12

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! Am I now seeking human approval or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin, ¹² for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus. Galatians 1:6-12

(NRSV)

Friends, it's so good to be with you in worship today at St. Luke's. If we haven't met before my name is Colin and I'm one of the pastors here, and in particular I'm the pastor of the *branches* community just across the parking lot. It's a joy to be in a different setting with you today and to be with you at the beginning of this new series. It's called "The Lies of Little Gods." I have to admit, when we were discussing this series, and I was having a conversation with Katie and Tom about leading off this series, I could feel a mix of emotions. I was intrigued by the topic, but also felt a sense of unease as I thought about the idols in my own life. The little gods (small g) that I have in my life. The way that I center things in my own life and make them my god – the thing that I worship. The thing that fills up all the margin, time, and energy in my life. And set my discipleship to Jesus aside. I started to think that as we preach this sermon series, there's going to be some people like me that kind of have those deep, incisive feelings of

maybe embarrassment. Or maybe feel kind of like we have to reassess everything. Maybe even, I daresay, offended by this kind of confrontational way of looking at our life.

Today, we're talking about the idol of approval of others. That we seek the approval of others in our own life, and we make that the center of everything that we do. We all do it. We all seek the approval of others because they are people who are more successful than we are. More important than we are. Or people we admire. It's said that we adopt the conduct and the speech of people we really admire. So, in order to impress them, to seek their approval or get their attention, we act just like they do. Or do what we think they would want us to do so we can get their approval.

It happened to us when we were sitting at a stop light. I drive a Rav4, and I'm not trying to impress anyone with my car. But you're sitting at a stoplight, and the person next to you is revving their engine, making a lot of noise. Then the light turns green, and their tires squeal, and they're off. And I think to myself this question today. Who are you trying to impress? Someone asked me this week, "Colin, didn't you study English? Isn't it *whom* are you trying to impress?" I had this image in my head about racing up to meet the Honda Civic at the next stop. And say to them, "Sir, Sir, roll down your window! *Whom* are you trying to impress?"

We all ask it colloquially, "Who are you trying to impress?" What's the big deal? And we ask that question because we all do it. We all seek the approval of others, and we center that approval in our lives.

When I lived in Little Rock before moving to Houston, my friend Jared and I signed up for "Tennis Apprentice." It was several weeks of us learning the fundamentals of tennis. I'd never played tennis before, and I was excited but not very confident in my athletic ability. But I was excited to learn a new sport, to hang out with my friends and to go through this process together. So, in the Tennis Apprentice program, you show up at the tennis courts, and there is a tennis pro there named Steve. He was teaching several of us in pairs the basics of the game. And the second or third week I'm playing with Jared back and forth, and we're doing great. We're in the groove and we have a rhythm going. I'm not out of breath and ready to die yet. But we're going back and forth and feeling very confident.

I'm looking over my shoulder like I hope Steve sees this, that I'm doing an awesome job. Steve then ran over to the side of our court and said to the rest of the players, "Everybody look!" And I thought that I was about to get the recognition I deserved. He says, "Jared has played

sports before.” What about me? I’m the other half of this pair, and he’s giving all the attention and celebration to Jared. And I’m the other half of these people playing tennis. So, for the rest of the Tennis Apprentice program, my entire goal was to get Steve’s attention and approval. I didn’t practice at home, and I didn’t work on my fundamentals. My entire goal was to look over my shoulder again and try to get Steve to notice me. Please notice me, Steve! And because I focused on that and not the fundamental basics of tennis, I failed at both. I wasn’t very good at tennis, and Steve never noticed me.

He’s probably forgotten who I am, and I haven’t obviously forgotten who he is. I have this deep wound about Steve, the pro tennis player. But I sought his approval for whatever reason, and I centered my whole experience on that. I wanted Steve to pay attention to me.

Again, we all do it. I read this study this week. It’s that young people who are dating self-reported - 75% of them said they’d lied or fabricated something about themselves to impress their date whether it was as big as a title or a credential that they had or as small as some piece of media they enjoyed. Like, “Oh, yeah, I loved that show.” Or “I love that movie” – but never having seen it before. And then you know, of course, you’re under the pressure like, “Oh, was your favorite part?” And you say, “Uhhhh...the ending? It was great, loved it.” We all do it.

One of my favorite examples of that is Michael Scott from “The Office.” This bumbling boss is asked by a woman, “Oh, have you read this book by Lee Iacocca?” And he says, “Read it? I own it. But I have not read it.” We all seek the approval of one another. And we center that approval in our conduct with one another. Like “please – notice me! See how good I’m doing. Give me some celebration or some accolade.” And we center that in our lives.

And that’s truly where we find ourselves in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. He writes this letter following the beginning of this new Christian movement, and he’s kind of planting these little communities all over. He sends this letter to Galatia in response to, just like us, this Easter resurrection news something has happened. But in order to get the entire context about what’s happening in Paul’s letter to the Galatians we should rewind even further back to the Exodus story. In Exodus 32, we get this really dramatic scene, part of which is depicted on your bulletin today, in which Moses and the Israelites have been delivered from slavery in Egypt, and then Moses is kind of collaborating with God on the creation of the Law. These new guardrails, this new way this community will live now that they’re free from slavery. And while he’s away in conversation with God Aaron is left in charge. And they build this statue, this golden calf, this

beautiful kind of concrete thing they can worship and ascribe power and worth and power to. The kind of thing that we overlook in the story is that they named it Yahweh. They give it the name of their covenant God, who delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

Then Moses comes back, and they say, “Look, Moses, aren’t you proud of us? We’ve made this statue, and it’s God. Look, God is a big cow. Are you impressed – it’s amazing.” And Moses is rightfully angry and frustrated, for he’s gone for just a little bit, and he comes back, and they’ve gone astray to the deliverance and freedom and the promise that God has given them. And one of the laws he’s coming to give says, “You shall have no other Gods before me.” You’ve centered something in your life that isn’t actually God, that has no power.

Then fast forward to Paul, and he has the exact same message for the Galatians. If you read at the beginning, it starts like any other of Paul’s letters that we have in the New Testament. It starts, “Hey, it’s me, Paul. I come on behalf of Jesus Christ, who delivered us and saved us, and he died, and he rose again. And I’m sending grace and peace to you in the name of that same God.” And also, some of the other letters begin with, “I thank God for you. I’m so grateful for you. You care for the poor, the orphan, and the widow; you’re lifting up the low; you’re sharing the Gospel. You’re a good example of a good disciple of Jesus.” But with Galatians, it’s not so. He says, “Hey, I’m Paul, this is where I’m coming from. Remember me. I’m astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who calls you in the name of the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.”

He starts in, he says, “What happened? You received this good news in Jesus Christ, and you’ve already gone astray.” Again, it’s a good Easter or post-Easter message for us because we’ve heard this good news of the resurrection. And maybe the luster has gotten tarnished. Or maybe the magic is kind of flowing away. Or maybe the excitement has gone downhill since then. We can remember it’s just a memory. We’re ready for another Easter, and we’ve kind of gone off course. We had our great Lenten practice, and now we’re off to the way we used to be. Paul’s saying the same things to the Galatians. “You started out so great with so much energy and zeal. I’m astonished that you’re now accepting something else.

The something else that they’re accepting is that there are other followers of Jesus from Jerusalem, and we can read about this in Acts 15. They’re saying yes, and the good news is the gospel of Jesus, and you have to abide by strict dietary laws. And you have to observe the Sabbath. And unfortunately, you have to be circumcised. And they’re bad-mouthing Paul.

They're saying, "You know, Paul doesn't know what he's talking about. You need this. This is the Gospel." To which Paul says twice, "There is no other Gospel, and if you hear that and receive that Gospel, let them be accursed." It's not good news; it's a burden. It's a curse.

It's idolatry. Most theologians and New Testament scholars say all human sin, all the ways that we miss the mark of who God originally intended us to be, are rooted in idolatry. That is, centering in our lives something else that isn't God. Making something, maybe even a good thing, a gift from God, the center point of our life, the main thing of our life, the center of gravity around which everything else orbits, is idolatry.

Reformer John Calvin says, "Our hearts are perpetual idol factories." We're not just thinking beings; we're loving beings. We're affectionate beings. We give our love and devotion to things other than ourselves. And what we truly love, what we really really love, is our God. James Smith puts it this way: "You are what you love. Your love transforms who you are. Your love is your worship." Timothy Johnson is a New Testament scholar, and he says, "Religion in its purest form, distilled down to its basic form, is where we seat ultimate power. Idolatry is giving a striving ultimate power to something that has no power. Ultimately." That's what idolatry is.

And when we set before us the approval of others like "Please notice me if I do this, will I achieve something, if I pray hard enough, or if I read enough Scripture, if I ascribe to all the spiritual disciplines." If I work, work, work, and work, I can earn this status that God already gives me. That's what Paul says. The good news of the Gospel is that God calls You "Child... Son...daughter." We witnessed it in baptism today. This is my son – this is my daughter in you I'm well pleased. God's approval of us. And our idolatry comes in when we say, "I want to work my way to that. I want to earn my way to that. I want to impress somebody so much that it feels and seems like I deserve it." Like that's what I've really achieved – what I've really done.

Our approval that we seek from others becomes the center point of our life and not this good news, this gospel, this death and resurrection of Jesus as the center. I want to preempt something – maybe some of you will go home today and say to your spouse, "Honey, I heard what Colin said today, and I'm not interested in seeking your approval anymore." Don't do that! I'm not saying that. For the love of God, seek the approval of your spouse. And seek the approval of your friends. Seek the approval of the people you admire. Seek the approval of your boss. I wore a tie today. Seek the approval of people you admire, who are ahead of you and who

are successful. But all of that seeking of approval of others is sourced in, is from the center of this. That you are approved of and loved by and embraced by and invited by God. A God who, in Jesus Christ, died for you, gave himself for you and rose from the dead for you.

It's the other way around. That's there's approval at the beginning, and from that approval from that naming that God gives you in your baptism everything else flows. Every place where you try to seek the approval of your spouse, your boss, or someone you love or admire comes from that center. Everything else, Paul says, is a curse, a burden, is idolatry. It isn't good news. But the good news is that the front end, at the very beginning, at the center of our lives, is this truth. God speaks about us before we know it, want it, or care about it. This approval of us. And from that everything else flows.

How do we live by that? How do we form our lives around this approval that we don't have to seek in God but that we can find and accept in God? Tony Campolo is a pastor, author, and Christian teacher. He tells the story that he was invited to speak at a conference in Hawaii. He went there, and because of the time zones, he was all messed up and found himself at a diner at 3 a.m. in Hawaii with a cup of coffee and a doughnut. And there he was, for a while, the only person, except for the man behind the counter and the cook in the back. Then, this group of women came in. They were boisterous, in excited conversation and they sat down in the booth behind him. And as he listened to their conversation, he realized they were prostitutes. One of them shared that it was his birthday the next day. Her friends kind of squashed it like, you know, who cares, who's going to celebrate you? It's just another day for us – who cares if it's your birthday? Then it seems this woman's name was Agnes. And after the group, including Agnes, left, Tony went to the counter and discovered that the counter person was the owner of the diner.

He said, "Hey, can we throw a birthday party for Agnes tomorrow?" The guy said, "Well, I guess. But why?" And probably wondered who this weirdo was who wanted to throw a party for Agnes. Campolo said, "Yes, you bake the cake, and I'll get all the decorations, and I'll come a little before three since they're here every night. And I'll decorate the place, and when they come, we'll yell 'Surprise!' and we'll sing 'Happy Birthday,' and then we'll give her the cake."

The guy said, "Sure, let's do it." So, Tony goes, and he buys the decorations, and he comes a little bit before 3 a.m., and he sets it all up. And there's a banner, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" and there's a beautiful cake with candles in it. Three a.m. comes, and the women come in, and they yell, "Surprise!" and they sing "Happy Birthday," as they sing to Agnes, tears well up in her

eyes and stream down her face. She blows out the candles, and they all say, “Cut us a piece,” and she pulls the cake closer to herself and asks, “Can I keep it?” They said, “Yeah, it’s your cake and you can do whatever you want with it, but why?” She says, “I never had a birthday cake before. And I want to take it home and maybe eat a piece now and then. But also open my refrigerator every day, and I’ll see that cake, and I’ll remember this.” So, she takes the cake and leaves, and all the other women stay. Tony and the owner are there, and there’s this awkward silence. Then Tony, as a great pastor and preacher in any awkward silence he knows what to do. He says, “Let’s pray.”

So they pray, and they thank God for Agnes’ life, and they thank God for her birthday, and they thank God for the cake and they celebrate. And they pray for each of the women, for Tony, for the owner, and for the cook. And they praise God, and thank God and pray and they say, “Amen.” And the owner, the man behind the counter, says, “Tony, I didn’t know you were a preacher. What church are you a part of?” Tony said, “I’m part of a church that throws parties for prostitutes at 3 a.m.” And the man behind the counter says, “I don’t go to church, but I’d go there.”

Tony didn’t ask Agnes, “Will you get yourself in line and then we’ll throw a party for you. When you figure life out and gets straight, we’ll celebrate who you are. When you become who you’re supposed to be first, and then we’ll throw a birthday party for you.” No, he threw the party out of that belovedness that he had, and he knew Agnes had they celebrated her. They said, “Agnes, you are a beloved child of God, and your birthday is worth celebrating.” She didn’t have to seek his approval or work for it; he didn’t have to work for her approval. They lived in and believed and celebrated that truth that God loved Agnes and loved Tony and loved those women and loved the owner of the diner. And out of that, a celebration happened. And as she said, she’ll look at that cake and always remember that someone celebrated her birthday. And she’ll remember that God loves her.

You don’t have to seek or work for another person’s approval to prove yourself. You don’t even have to seek God’s approval. In Christ, God loves you, cares for you, embraces you, and invites you in every moment. As a birthday party to come in. You are my child; you are my son; you are my daughter, my beloved. In you, I am well pleased. Any other gospel is no gospel at all. But that gospel is worth living for and is certainly worth sharing. And thanks be to God for that.

Let's pray. *Almighty God, we thank thee for that good news, that gospel that you love and care for us in every moment and are celebrating us because we are your children. Remind us of that in ourselves and others when we seek another's approval and attention, it comes from a place of remembering who we truly are. No more, no less than who you say we are. We ask all of this in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ, Amen.*