

# biblestudy: january 2023

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*Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series*

## **January 1, 2023 Text: Galatians 3:23-4:7 “Children of God Through Adoption”**

Friends of mine who were adopted give varying accounts of the experience. “These were the only parents I ever knew.” “I don’t think my adopting mother really wanted me.” “All I ever felt was love.” “I was always afraid I might be turned back in for another adoption.” “I didn’t know I was adopted until my aunt let it slip out.” “I always liked the way my family said they had picked me out.” “I am no biological kin to my brother and sisters, but we love each other.”

Paul says that we with faith are heirs of all that God has to give (Galatians 4:7). That’s what it means to be adopted by God. The kind of dividing lines we usually draw are erased: “No longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female” (Galatians 3:25).

The other day I had some leftover food. I didn’t want to toss it into the dump, so I threw it out into my backyard. I was offering it to the deer, the squirrels, the wild birds, and the occasional fox that visit. I was glad to share my bounty. These creatures could have nourishment rather than hunger. That was four days ago. I just looked out the window. My offering is still there...untouched. It makes me feel sad. What could have been a feast of grace is still there...untouched. It makes me feel disappointment. What could have been does not seem to be happening. I offered it, but they didn’t accept.

Am I stretching a point to say that God must feel that way when we decline the fullness of God’s offering? Under the law (Galatians 3:19-23) we could be saved only by our righteousness, our right-living. Which one of us would meet that standard! But our faith in Christ saves us into the family by adoption (Galatians 3:26). It is as if because our sin leaves us a few dollars short of the full price, Christ Jesus has paid the difference, so we get the full benefit. We have become heirs of all that God would give. Heirs through adoption!

In Ephesians 1:5-6, Paul repeats this blessing from God: adoption as God’s children. Galatians 3:27 sees baptism as the sign of God’s adopting us. As the new year begins, we do well to recall what it means to be in God’s family. Adopted as an infant...adopted as a teen-ager...adopted as an adult...Might we say “*adopted*” in order to be “*adapted*”—according to the will and purposes of God’s love!

### **What Someone Else Has Said:**

In commenting on Galatians 3:28 (Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female), Hans Dieter Betz (*Galatians*, Fortress Press) writes: “It is significant that Paul makes these statements not as utopian ideals or as ethical demands, but as accomplished facts.”

### **Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Who, me, Lord?...”

## **January 8, 2023 Text: Luke 15:11-32 “We All Need Grace and Assurance”**

I wonder. Do you think we have mislabeled this familiar story, “The Prodigal Son”? We call it that because this younger son was reckless in spending what he had (Luke 15:13). He got rid of what he had inherited (v. 11). He spent his livelihood and came home in repentance. He got a good welcome from his delighted father.

But there is another prodigal figure in this account. Was not the father extravagant in giving away the inheritance? And when the older brother got all bent out of shape, the father still proclaimed, “All that is mine is yours” (v. 31). Did the angry-spirited son deserve this? For that matter, did the “crawling back home” younger son deserve the welcome he got? I think this story might well be said to be about the prodigal love of the father. He is the one who gave away out of love and not because gifts were deserved. The Prodigal Father!

In a sense, the father’s generosity was poured out on the undeserving son as it was on the repentant son. God’s love is like that! God offers “all that is mine” (v. 31) to any who will accept it. (I wish Jesus had made this parable a little longer--what did that older son do with his father’s generous (prodigal) spirit? For that matter, what do I do with God’s generous (prodigal) offer of grace to me? Is God’s grace wasted on me?)

If you had been there when Jesus told this story, when would you have

said, “Oh, yeah! Now He is talking about me!”? For some of us, we might identify with the son who took off on his own only to realize that he had made a mistake. Or, we might even see ourselves as one of the persons who gave the homeless young man a job with the pigs. Many of us have stayed hard at work in the church and, like the elder brother, never wandered into “never never” land. Maybe you see yourself as one of the bystanders, neighbors who showed up for the big party, but who had no real investment in the matter. Some may even have “forgiveness” times and “I love you” times like the father.

Truth to tell, sometimes I am one of these characters and sometimes I am another. I give thanks for the God who is always the forgiving, generous, grace-pouring parent. I guess I could say that Jesus told a story about me. What about you?

### **What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *A Journey of Love and Miracles* (iUniverse), Ken and Pat Birt have written: “As you go through your own journey, remember that other people are also on journeys. Be available, as possible, to others who are in need and offer them your love as you also assure them of God’s love.”

### **Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Generous God, thank You...”

## **January 15, 2023 Text: John 17:1-24, Ephesians 4:14 “In the World, Not of It”**

There must be a dozen or more places in this week’s Gospel text that we might explore, but let’s zero in on John 17:15. Jesus prayed, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to protect them from the evil one.”

Wouldn’t you think our Lord would want to get us out of a world filled with racism, gender discrimination, political strife, climate damage, elitism, wars, avarice, sexual bias...You name your own pains in the world. Wouldn’t you think the Lord would want us to get out of such a world?

But, He says, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:18)

If ever there were a divine injunction for us to work for social justice and political reform and human unity, this is it.

Paul certainly knew how difficult it would be to live as a faithful, holy

disciple. He described that journey as being tossed to and fro and about and being victimized by lying schemes (Ephesians 4:14). Were it not for the prayerful support of our Lord, who would want to live in such a world? Sometimes, we who are Christian are tempted to believe that faith in our Lord is enough to make life flow gently. Not so! God chose to live in a world that misunderstood Him, that mistreated Him, and eventually killed Him. Jesus certainly knew what He was asking us to do when He prayed that we stay in the world!

There is a verse that comes just before today’s study passage. Look at John 16:33. Then, look at 1 John 5:4. Both speak of how the Lord has conquered the world. That’s why He sends us into the world. We are to be part of the way Jesus overcomes prejudice, hatred, disunity, and brokenness.

Life in the Church is not so we can escape the world; it is so we can engage the world.

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What Someone Else Has Said:

Bob Farr and Kay Kotan wrote (*10 Prescriptions for a Healthy Church*, Abingdon): “Healthy congregations have some degree of conflict. If there is not conflict, there is a lack of pushing the envelope. A healthy congregation is one that has learned how to manage

conflict—not necessarily resolve it.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Go with me, Lord, into the world, and show me what difficult love looks like...”

January 22, 2023 Text: Colossians 3:12-17 “Chosen by God and Dressed for Success”

Tonight, I shall take off the shirt I have worn today. Tomorrow morning, I shall put on a different shirt. The writer of Colossians uses the image of taking off and putting on clothes to describe how believers are to get rid of old practices and to start wearing new and divinely-touched garments. (I need to keep in mind that I can still put on that dirty shirt tomorrow. Even if I have grown in my faith walk, I can still go back to old ways.)

Translators scramble to find words that capture the essence of what Paul is saying. The NRSV says (Colossians 3:12): compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Common English Bible says “gentleness.” W. J., Conybeare chooses “tenderness of heart, self-humiliation.” J. B. Phillips renders the text as “accept life and be most patient.” In The Message, Eugene Peterson refers to “quiet strength and discipline.”

Do you recognize yourself yet?

Oops. There are also those things that we might recognize: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, slander, abusive language (vv. 5, 8). Surely Paul is talking about those folks who didn’t get to church last Sunday. Maybe. Maybe not.

Do you recognize yourself yet?

Most of us are described to some extent in both robes—those of Christ and those of the world. After all, this epistle is written to those who called the Church home...sort of like we do. Change the name of the church from Colossae to Bethany or Trinity or First or Main Street or St. John’s...and the texts still apply. Do you recognize yourself yet?

In listing the clothes of the world and the clothes of God, the writer lists items most of which are found in our relationship with others. And the standard of judgment comes in Colossians 3:17---Can I do and say what I do and say and authentically say that it is in the name of Jesus. What would Jesus do? What would Jesus have me do? Do you recognize yourself yet?

What Someone Else Has Said:

J. Mickey Efird (*Christ, the Church, and the End*, Judson Press) wrote: “The Christian experience is one that is constantly and continuously renewed day-by-day, because the present world with its power of sin and evil constantly beckons to one to return to the old ways.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Stay with me, Lord; this isn’t easy. Help me wear the robes of Your presence...”

January 29, 2023 Text: Matthew 22:1-14 “Sitting at the Adult Table”

The chief priests and religious authorities were trying to pick a verbal fight with Jesus, maybe tricking Him into saying something that would turn the people against Him. Jesus answered their forays by telling stories. Today’s study text is such a parable.

There are several handles for picking up these verses, but let’s zero in on the strange scene when the king gets upset because one of the guests at the wedding party is not wearing the appropriate attire for the occasion (Matthew 22:11-13).

In that middle eastern culture, the clothes told a lot about a person. [Take a look at last week’s study; believers are invited to wear the clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (Colossians 3:10, 12)] In the parable about the wedding feast, this man is not wearing a wedding robe. The king becomes furious and sends the man away.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees and scribes that it is not enough just to say “Yes” to God. We are also expected to live according to the values of God. Showing up at the party—showing up at church—is not enough. We are also to relate to others, make our decisions, and be spiritually clothed (Colossians 3:10, 12) according to the standards of the Lord of the Church, the One who invited us to the party.

You can tell that those religious leaders were disturbed by this story

that Jesus told because the very next thing they did was “plotted to entrap him in what he said” (Matthew 22:14).

If I am not challenged by this story, perhaps I have not heard it well.

If I am not bothered by this story, perhaps I have too high an opinion of myself.

If I am not pondering how I might “dress better,” perhaps I am too settled in my faith journey.

The clothes we are to wear are those spelled out in the previously mentioned Colossians text. Am I dressed well-enough to stay at the king’s party?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Bishop Kenneth Carder has written (*Living Our Beliefs*, Discipleship): “The church’s identity and mission are rooted in God. As a community called into being for the purpose of participating in God’s life and mission, the church must live its divine identity and mission.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Clothe me, Holy God...”



“There is no pit so deep, that God’s love is not deeper.”  
Corrie ten Boom