

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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What Ultimately Counts

Galatians 5:2-12

Though I didn't intentionally plan to preach a February series of sermons on love, things have unfolded that way, and I believe the Spirit is somehow involved in that. Sometimes the Spirit's freedom involves strategic thinking and careful advance planning. At other times the Spirit's freedom involves just taking the next step, without an absolutely clear understanding of the long range picture. So today, let's take the next step and return to the subject of love by listening in on a church where brothers and sisters in Christ are struggling to get along and live by the Spirit.

The fiercest disagreement is between the founder of the church, Paul, and some rival missionaries who have come into the congregation with a message that runs against the grain of the good news that Paul has been preaching. According to Paul, everything necessary for us to be put right with God and with one another has already been fully accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God has already secured our freedom by rescuing us from the present evil age. God has already brought the old world of sin and death to an end and inaugurated the new world of righteousness and life. Through the cross, we've been forgiven and set free for a new life in Christ, loving God and loving one another in the power of the Spirit, participating in and giving witness to God's new creation. All this, by the grace of God, is a done deal.

So you can imagine Paul's disappointment, frustration, and anger when others try to win over the Galatians with what he considers a distorted gospel. True, their intentions may be good. They too want nonbelievers to know God. They too want to spread the message about Jesus the Messiah. They too want individuals to become part of the people of God. But their version of how these things happen is fundamentally at odds with the conviction that salvation is a gift of God, not a human accomplishment, and that the gospel unites, rather than divides, different groups of people.

The problem is that Paul's opponents want to supplement the death and resurrection of Jesus with things that aren't essential to being right with God and being a member of God's people. These rival missionaries agree that faith in Christ is good, as far as it goes. But from there they want to tack on additional expectations, rules, and regulations rooted in Jewish law and custom, especially Sabbath restrictions, dietary laws, and the calendar of feasts and festivals. To some, this may come across as an attractive way of filling out or completing the saving work of God in Christ. But to Paul, it comes across as a contradiction of what God has already accomplished in Christ. And anyone who signs on to this version of the gospel, and takes on the lifestyle that goes with it, is acting as if the death and resurrection of Jesus are inadequate for our salvation. In effect, they're exiting the new creation and re-entering the old world that's passing away.

No wonder, in the verse right before the beginning of today's text, Paul admonishes the Galatians: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let

yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (5:1). With that warning, Paul sets the stage for the rest of what he says in our Scripture passage.

As you can tell, Paul is very big on the "already" of God's saving work in Christ. He doesn't back down in preaching about what God has done, has completed, has accomplished, has achieved, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But Paul's stress on the past dimension of the gospel doesn't mean he has no interest in the future aspect of the gospel. In verse 5 of today's text, he writes, "But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope." The "righteousness for which we hope," or as other translations render it, "the hope of righteousness," is Paul's way of speaking about the completion of God's saving work in Christ. That is, when Christ comes again, God's justice and peace will be fully and finally established, the full scope of how God is setting things right will be revealed, and those who are in Christ will participate in the fullness of the new creation.

Meanwhile, believers already experience assurance about their relationship with God and their place in the people of God. Even now, the Spirit inhabits believers and gives us confidence in the faithfulness of God. The Spirit enables us to rely upon God's promises and to trust in God's eventual triumph over all that resists his reign.

At the same time, the Spirit stirs our longing for the future that God has guaranteed in Christ. Notice how Paul says that "by faith we eagerly await *through the Spirit* the righteousness for which we hope." In other words, we don't bring in the kingdom of God by our own determination, efforts, and achievements. What we, and the entire world, need, and what God intends for us, can only be brought about by God. Only the righteousness of God, not human striving, can make it happen. But even now, we who have put our faith in Christ experience God's presence in the form of the Spirit, who creates in us a joyous longing for the ultimate unveiling of God's glory and grace.

For now, we wait. And our waiting is characterized by faith. This is something that Paul keeps circling back to in his relationship with the Galatians, namely, that faith is indispensable to a right relationship with God and membership in the people of God. This is often captured in the phrase "justification by faith." In other words, the death and resurrection of Jesus are God's action to rescue us and reconcile us to himself. And the appropriate response to what God has done in Christ is faith/trust. When we lose sight of this fundamental truth, we become vulnerable to thinking that our standing with God is based on our merit rather than his mercy, when in fact only God's righteousness, not our own, can do what needs to be done in us and in the world.

God knows that. That's why what he wants from us is faith. He wants us to stake our lives on his promise. He wants us to trust in his faithfulness. He doesn't want us to relate to him on the basis of 100 percent ironclad certitude that never has any questions or struggles, and allows no room for growth. That kind of mentality can lead to arrogance and overconfidence about our own power and capabilities. We're then in danger of treating righteousness as a reward for our own effort and certitude, rather than as a gift from God.

Maybe one of the reasons that circumcision and obedience to the Jewish law were attractive to some folks in the Galatian churches was because these things gave them an outward sign of security about their relationship with God, and a clear cut set of rules to govern their behavior as his people. And thus maybe a deeper sense of certitude about where they stood with God.

It reminds me of a story that Roger Olson tells about architect Christopher Wren. Olson writes:

In 1689 the city of Windsor, England was in an uproar. The city fathers had commissioned famed architect Sir Christopher Wren, designer of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, to design a new town hall. The building was complete as desired with one exception.

The city fathers wanted their meeting rooms above a "corn market"—an open space for farmers and others to display and sell their products. But when they inspected the new building they were dismayed. Wren had used a new technique for supporting the floor/ceiling below the meeting space and above the corn market that required no pillars (except, of course, at the edges). To the city fathers and others, it seemed obvious that the ceiling of the corn market would soon fall under their weight as they met above it.

The city fathers insisted that Wren add four pillars in the middle of the corn market to support the floor of their meeting room above. Wren refused; the added pillars would destroy the beauty of the building. He adamantly insisted that his design would work; the ceiling of the corn market was in no danger of collapsing. The city fathers were more adamant; the pillars must be added. Wren reluctantly agreed and everyone watched over the next few months as his workmen created the required four pillars. . . .

Some years after the building's celebrated dedication the corn market ceiling needed re-painting. As workmen built their scaffolds they noticed something strange. Wren's pillars did not touch the ceiling. The space between their tops and the ceiling was so small as not to be noticeable without close inspection. The ceiling had long stood without support except in the city fathers' imaginations. Wren was dead by the time this was discovered. The city fathers then added material to fill in the gaps "just in case."¹

Sometimes, we treat our good works, or perhaps our outward signs of religiosity, or maybe our association with a particular group, like Wren's deceptive pillars. We rely upon them to shore up our salvation or reinforce our sense of God's favor. We fear that God's freely given grace may not be enough, so we try to add on to it, just to be safe. But then we're confronted with the singularity of the gospel that says your relationship with God, and with God's people, is built on his unmerited grace and undeserved fidelity, revealed fully and decisively in Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection are enough.

This good news, this word of promise, aims to call forth faith. Not only faith as in the time when you first come to believe in Jesus Christ. Or faith as in intellectual agreement with a set of doctrinal statements about God. Or faith as in association with a particular community of believers. All these dimensions of faith are important. But according to Paul, the thing about faith that matters most is captured this way: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love" (v. 6).

Within the church, which is here to be a sign of the new creation in Christ, all the social distinctions and human classifications that we use to establish our sense of identity and worth plummet in value compared to the preciousness of faith. In the community of Christ's people, neither male nor female ultimately counts, but only faith expressing itself through love. Neither black nor white ultimately counts, but only faith expressing itself through love. Neither Democrat nor Republican ultimately counts, but only faith expressing itself through love. Neither traditional music nor contemporary music ultimately counts, but only faith expressing itself through love. Neither bachelors degree nor high school diploma ultimately counts, but only faith expressing itself through love. Neither suit and tie nor jeans and t-shirt ultimately counts, but only faith expressing itself through love. And this is just a partial glimpse of freedom in Christ.

But freedom in Christ doesn't mean license to do whatever you want. Paul doesn't say, "Okay, now that you're saved by grace through faith, anything goes." No, what does go is love, inspired and led by the Spirit. That's the way it is in a fellowship where the primary identity marker is faith. Where faith is genuinely kindled by God, it will come forth in action. And that action will look like the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us (2:20). Remember that for Christians, love is more than a marketing theme that shows up on store shelves each February. Love is the way that faith shows up and shows forth because of what God has done for us in Christ.

¹ From Olson's blog at the Patheos website. July 25, 2012. Accessed February 16, 2017 <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/07/an-arminian-sermon-illustration/>>.