



Galatians 2:1-10
 Finding Freedom: Galatians
 Jesus is Enough

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This morning we continue our journey through Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. In his opening to the letter he expresses some concern and even shock about the Galatians' discipleship to Jesus – he's heard that they are following some other “gospel – some other “good news” – which Paul says is false good news, a false gospel. Then last week we looked at the second section of the letter where Paul transitions to letting them know that the good news he brought them is true and reliable because it came straight to him from the resurrected Jesus. It's not good news that's been invented by people. And in doing that, Paul briefly tells his story of coming to faith in Jesus after having previously been diametrically and violently opposed to the Christian faith in its infancy.

And that brings us to today's passage, where Paul continues the story of his personal faith journey – not for the sake of telling that story, but for the sake of assuring them about the truth and reliability of the gospel message...that Jesus really is enough. And that is the crux of the issue that seems to have infiltrated the churches in Galatia: **Is faith in Jesus enough for salvation, or is it Jesus plus something more?** That question is at the heart of why he writes. So he fast-forwards fourteen years from when he stopped persecuting Jesus' followers and started following Jesus with them. Let's dive into today's passage, though I'm going to take it in a couple sections. Galatians 2:1-10 is our text for the day, though we'll pause in the reading after the first five verses. **(Galatians 2:1-2). (Sermon Title Slide)**

So, Paul goes up to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus. Barnabas was a Jewish Christian who according to Acts 9 was essentially the first person to welcome Paul as a Christian. The other Christian leaders were afraid of Paul because of his previous violent persecution of the church. But Barnabas believed him and helped persuade the other Christians about Paul's authentic faith.

Titus was a Greek Christian whom Paul led to faith in Christ. The letter of Titus, later in the New Testament, is written to him by Paul. The three of

them go to Jerusalem where Paul wants to meet with other Christian leaders. Why? Because of what he writes in the second half of verse 2 where he says, **“I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain” (Galatians 2:2b)** The race metaphor is about his faith and his ministry of sharing the gospel message with people. Paul uses this same metaphor in 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy, also. But here, he clearly wanted to make sure that what he was doing – his ministry, his preaching, his own personal faith and understanding about Jesus – was in line with what others were teaching as well. He didn’t want to be an outlier, or teaching something that was contrary to what other Christians were teaching and being taught.

This is such an important and relevant message for us in the 21st Century, just as it was then, because: **There are people who get the gospel message mixed up with other priorities and will completely twist and pervert the message of Jesus.** Now, before we go further, we should acknowledge that all of us are susceptible to this, and probably we’ve all done this before. I’m sure I have, too. So I’m not saying this as one who is “perfect”. But we still need to call it out when we see it. And last week, at the event at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th, there were some who were there with Christian symbols – such as the cross in **this picture** – (“Jesus Saves” sign, and more) as if Jesus were blessing and leading their efforts...as if the scene that played out that day were somehow in line with the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹



Nothing could be further from the truth. I don’t care what political party you adhere to, that kind of behavior is not the Christian message. The gospel is not about power and coercion and using force. No one forces their way into God’s Kingdom. They are invited in, through faith in Jesus. When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, Peter took out his knife to defend Jesus – let alone go on the offensive – and Jesus told him to put it away (John 18:11). Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:43-44). Jesus says the peace-makers are the ones who are blessed (Matthew 5:9).

So we want to make sure that our theology and how we live out our faith, are in line with Jesus and what the Bible teaches and what Christians generally believe...and not mixed with, or used for, other ideologies. Yes, there *will* be

some variety as Christians emphasize different aspects of Scripture and theology over other aspects – that’s why, for example, we have different denominations and non-denominational churches. **But we want to make sure our theology, and the theology of our pastors and churches, is in line with Jesus and Biblical Christianity.** This is one good thing about denominations such as ours, and partnerships between denominations and between churches: There’s accountability for theology and how we live our faith in the world, to make sure we’re not “running our race in vain.” These kinds of things prevent rogue theology and rogue practice of our faith.

Paul wanted to make sure he wasn’t going “rogue.” He’s a team player, he wants what’s best for the Church, for individual Christians, and for the Kingdom of God. And he knows that if he’s doing his own thing, out of step with the message of other Christian leaders, that it’s going to damage the Gospel and the Church and its witness in the world. So he connected with other Christian leaders to make sure he was on the same page, and running his race in the right direction.

That gets us into the reading of the rest of the passage, so let’s continue reading the rest of the passage – Galatians 2:3-10....So, **Circumcision is a central focus of Old Testament theology, and it gets discussed in the New Testament quite a bit as well – such as in Galatians.** There were theological debates about circumcision. That might sound kind of odd to us – when was the last time you had a conversation about circumcision – and was it even a theological one?

But for them it was a big deal: **There was some disagreement between some of the early Christians over the role of the Jewish faith and Jewish practices within Christianity.** Remember, Jesus was Jewish, his teachings were all centered on what we call the Old Testament, the “Jewish Bible” you could call it, and the Christian faith grows out of Judaism. So, there was a debate about how “Jewish” a person needed to be in following Jesus. And one of the central concerns was the Jewish practice of circumcision. We first encounter circumcision in Scripture in Genesis 17. It was a symbol of God’s faithfulness to his promise to make Abraham a father of many nations, a man with many descendants in other words, even though both he and his wife

Sarah were “advanced in age” (well beyond the child-bearing age) and had thus far not had any children between them.

So: Circumcision was a reminder of God’s power and faithfulness to give them many descendants even though they are well beyond child-bearing age, and it was to be carried on throughout the generations as a reminder of God’s covenant and promise to make them fruitful.

Abraham, at age 99, along with all the males of his household – servants, other relatives perhaps, he had a son through Hagar, Ishmael who was 13 at this time – they all were circumcised right then. With no anesthetic. If there ever were proof that God really speaks to people, this is it, because who would make this up and then do it to themselves? ☺

But, in essence, it was a symbol for being Jewish – it’s through the guys, but women are included in God’s promise as well. And it’s not that other nations and ethnicities didn’t also do circumcision; but nonetheless, it’s a symbol for Jews of God’s covenant with *them*, and so every Jewish boy was and is circumcised on the 8th day of life. **You can think of it as the Old Testament equivalent of baptism: it’s a physical sign of what God is doing in our lives, and our belonging to Him.**

So, because the Church grew out of the Jewish faith, the question in Paul’s day was: Do non-Jewish people (Gentiles) who come to faith in Jesus need to, in a sense, become Jewish as well? If so, that would mean circumcision for the guys. And with the spread of the Roman empire throughout that part of the world, much of the evangelism of the Christian faith was to people who weren’t Jewish and weren’t circumcised. We see in today’s passage that Titus, who is with Paul, is of Roman descent, for example. And he’s writing to churches outside the boundaries of Israel.

For Paul, to require people to essentially “become Jewish” before becoming Christian was an affront to Jesus’ death on the cross. It became a “works righteousness” issue. Is Jesus’ death enough for anyone and everyone, or not?

As Paul says in this passage, there were some who he calls “false believers” (who followed and propagated the “different gospel” he mentioned in 1:6) who believed that a Gentile needed to first become Jewish – be circumcised, perhaps take on other Jewish practices also – before becoming a follower of Jesus. They “infiltrated” their ranks, and tried to make them “slaves” – meaning, present them with a laundry list of things they needed to do in order to be considered Jews who followed Jesus. Paul experienced that some himself, and that seems to be at the heart of the “different gospel” that he has heard the Galatians have been turning to as well.

And Paul vehemently disagreed with that, and the consensus of those with whom he spoke were like-minded with him and also agreed that Jesus is enough. Race and ethnicity religious rituals don’t matter when it comes to Jesus and salvation. You don’t need Jesus plus a bunch of stuff in order to have a right relationship with God. God accepts us as we are when we confess our sin – which is an important step because Jesus died for sin – and then we put our trust in Jesus: Christ crucified and raised from the dead. That’s all we need for righteousness and a right relationship with God.

Now, just to be clear, that doesn’t mean we forsake “doing things” in the name of our faith. It’s not like the Ten Commandments or the teachings of Jesus himself are set aside. God calls us to holy living and loving our neighbors as ourselves. In fact, Paul makes the comment at the end of this passage that he is eager to “remember the poor” as were the other Christians. So “loving our neighbor” and helping those in need is an example of something we do to live out our faith. But we don’t do those things to get right with God; rather, we do them because we *are* right with God – through faith in Jesus. That’s it. We don’t need to do stuff to get right with God – that just becomes a burden to knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior.

And so: **One of the outcomes of this is that Christianity became its own separate, independent faith, apart from Judaism.** If this had not been their understanding of the gospel message...if they felt that Jesus’ teaching was that you have to become Jewish first and do the things that set apart Judaism from other faith traditions...if that had won the day, then Christianity would

be a branch of the Jewish faith. We'd be Jewish followers of Jesus – not Jewish by ethnicity, of course, but by religion.

Two things to highlight out of this. **First, for those of us who are Jesus followers, let's make sure we're not falling into the trap that the "false believers" did who Paul writes of.** It's not Jesus "plus" anything. It's not Jesus plus certain traditions, or Jesus plus dressing a certain way, or Jesus plus worshiping the "right way", or Jesus plus something else. Too frequently, the impression people (non-Christians, that is) have is that in order to be a Christian you have to fit into a certain box – and oftentimes the box looks very small. Too often, we Christians come across like we're the judges of who is a Jesus follower. But that's God's job. We welcome people as they are, and God works on their hearts to bring about transformation – just as he does with each of us. So there's a word of caution here for Christians.

Second of all: **For anyone who is not a follower of Jesus** (and I think this is applicable to Christians, too, because we can be susceptible to this) **but is open to God's presence or even simply believes/hopes that there's an after-life: for anyone like that, this is really good news.** It's gospel. Because it means that Jesus is enough. Your search for God, your quest for hope, your desire for eternity and even earthly love and joy and making sense of the world where pandemics happen, poverty persists, and the Mariners keep losing... **That quest for all of that (maybe not the Mariners losing part) can come to an end and land on Jesus for the answer. He is enough.**

And there's a lot of freedom in that (including for believers who fall for the trap of "Jesus plus something" theology). Whatever kind of works you're doing to please God or be "a good person" with the hope that you might be good enough for heaven...you don't have to do those things any more for that reason. You can free yourself of the burden of trying to live a certain way in order to please God, or to have good "karma", or to simply check a box so you feel better about yourself. **You don't have to go through life wondering if you've done enough for whoever or whatever you think is on the other side of the grave.** What a burden to live that way! How would you ever know if you've done enough? How *could* you ever know if you've

done enough of remembering the poor, loving your spouse or kids well enough, being neighborly enough, or giving enough money to charity or to the church, and so forth?

But Jesus has taken all of that away. **You can be assured of a right relationship with God, assured of forgiveness for all the ways you fall short of God’s standards, and be relieved of worry and concern and uncertainty about eternity, thanks to Jesus.** What a freedom! What a burden lifted! What a gift of grace! And that’s what it is. It’s all God’s grace.

It’s like the guy who died, went to heaven, and stood at the pearly gates. Peter said he could come in once he reached a thousand points. He’d get points for all the things he’d done right on earth. The guy said, “Well, I stayed faithfully married to my wife for 62 years.” “Great!” Peter said, “you get 2 points for that.” “Only two points? Yikes. OK...well, I went to church every Sunday and gave 10 percent of my income to the church as well.” “Fantastic! That’s worth a couple more points.” “Ok, uh...I served at a foodbank and a homeless shelter on a regular basis for over 20 years.” “Excellent! Three more points” Peter said. “Three points?” the man said. At this rate, the only way I’ll get to 1,000 is by the grace of God.” “Bingo!” Peter said. “Come on in!”

You and I are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, and not by any works of our own. And that’s been the gospel message since the inception of the church. In fact, it was the message Jesus brought *before* there really was a “church” – that’s *why* it’s been the message of the church! Imagine that! What a novel concept: that what we believe is based on *Jesus’* life – his teaching, his living, his death, his resurrection. We need not mix it up with any other ideology or theology. Jesus is enough, and by his grace he invites you and me to be his disciples, loving God and loving the world around us so they’d enter the Kingdom of heaven with you. That is the race set before us. Let’s not run it in vain. Instead, let’s run it well, for the glory of God. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ Wheaton College, one of the leading Evangelical institutions of higher learning, released a statement condemning the use of Christian symbols and imagery at the 1/6 event. You can read about the statement in this article, and there is a link to the statement at the end of the article: <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/current/nation/wheaton-college-capitol-raid/>