



Galatians 5:1-15
Finding Freedom: Galatians
The Only Thing That Counts

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As we continue in our series going through Paul's letter to Galatians, we come to an important section of the letter that really starts to shift things into a new gear, and that shift then carries through the rest of the letter. So we'll recap a little, then move into this new mode. Thus far, throughout the letter Paul has been relentlessly trying to get the Galatian Christians to return to a life of righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus, as they have been convinced by others that righteousness comes through doing certain religious practices. Food purity laws are one thing Paul addresses, but the biggest issue seems to be circumcision. Paul addressed it earlier in the letter and he comes back to it here....**Read Galatians 5:1-15.**

Much of Galatians thus far has been highly theological and grounded in religious practices that are pretty foreign to us. It's hard for us to believe that some of these things – like circumcision as a religious rite – were such a big deal for them. Paul is really passionate about this, perhaps most pointedly so in the entire letter in verse 12 when he says about those who have led the Galatians astray into works righteousness, that he wishes they would “go the whole way and emasculate themselves.”

So this is a big deal because: **At the core is a major theological question of: How are we made right in God's eyes: through our own effort, or through God's effort?** Where a person lands on this question of faith and works, and which one leads to righteousness – a right relationship with God – is like the choice between marrying one particular person or someone else, or deciding whether to take a job offer in Seattle or New York City, or deciding whether to get your college degree in Political Science or Chemistry, or keeping your franchise quarterback or trading him. The choice made on those kinds of decisions lead down radically different paths...and this spiritual decision puts us on a path not just for here and now, but into eternity.

So here in Galatians, Paul is making the argument that choosing the path of works righteousness leads to a life of bondage and slavery to religious “stuff” while going on the path of “faith in Jesus” leads to freedom. We may not

think of having the same paths to choose from, but really: we do. **The paths we are tempted to go down may be called something different now or they may appear less “spiritual” but they still are paths that lead away from the life of faith in Jesus.** It can be anything from other religions to so-called “non-religious” place in life – with people on that path famously labeled in the last few years as the “nones”. The void is then usually filled with other stuff such as the pursuit of pleasure or wealth or something else. So, the alternate paths to the path of faith in Jesus that we have today are no less tempting than what they were dealing with almost 2,000 years ago, and they are no less oppositional to the Gospel message.

A lot of the letter has felt very “theological” and heady, with a healthy dose of Old Testament references thrown in to add even more complexity to it. And in the first 5 ½ verses of today’s passage we see more of that. Paul is recapping much of what he’s previously said to them. The one thing that maybe jumps out here is this in verse 4 where says that trying to be justified by the law alienates them from Christ; “you have fallen away from grace.” **This (verse 4) is a strong warning from Paul to them, and to us.** It’s like being on a two-lane highway with a speed limit of 50 miles per hour, and approaching a curve with a recommended speed of 15 mph. That’s the warning, the caution, about what’s ahead. If you ignore the sign and take that curve at 50, then the consequences will be disastrous, perhaps even fatal. Paul is giving that same kind of strong warning here at the end of verse 4.

But then, half way into verse 6 Paul shifts gears. The first sentence of verse 6 about neither circumcision nor uncircumcision having any value could have been dropped almost anywhere else in the letter prior to this. He’s relentless, as if he figures if he just says the same thing enough they will eventually cry “uncle,” give in, and live by faith.

But then all of a sudden in the second half of verse 6 there’s this change. In fact, actually, the change comes in just the last few words, because even the first part of the last half of verse 6 still could have been dropped in the letter at any point thus far. He writes, “The only thing that counts is faith...” Right...we get it, Paul! For crying out loud! We get it! Faith in Jesus is all that matters! Ok! No more works. Faith alone. No more works. But then

comes something new:

**“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”
(Galatians 5:6b)**

What? What is this? Faith...expressing itself...as “Love”? In the middle of this fiery, confrontational, argumentative, persuasive, repetitive and corrective theological letter that is setting them straight on an utterly foundational doctrine: we get here a message of faith, not just in a theologically intellectual sense, not faith without works, but “faith expressed in love”? It’s like a breath of fresh air! There are almost 138 verses in Galatians...and we get this at the 111th verse. 80% of the way in! And: It completely turns upside down what the Galatian Christians have been doing: Faith comes first. It’s the foundation. It’s been drilled into us thus far. But what does that then look like? Is it just head knowledge and doctrine? Is it just a belief that resides inside of us? No. It “expresses itself in love.” It shows itself in love. In other words, the evidence of true and genuine faith in Jesus is worked out, is lived out, is expressed...in love.

With this one word and Paul’s further discussion of it in verses 13 and 14, it’s like a window is opened that leads into a whole new realm of how to know God and how to live. ...how to be in relationship with God and with people. I’m no astronomer, but I enjoy the interaction between the exploration of the stars through powerful telescopes like the Hubble and the James Webb telescope that is supposed to get launched later this year as the follow-up to the Hubble...I love reading about their discoveries in light of what the Bible tells us about God creating everything. In fact, just this morning there was an unusually bright, and slightly oblong-looking object in the southern sky that I could see as I drove south out of our neighborhood. It looked like the conjunction of a couple planets...but I know that happened this past December and there was a lot of publicity about it then and there’s been no talk about a similar event recently...So I don’t know what I saw. Plus I was driving and I didn’t want to get in an accident, so I was only getting brief glances. So maybe it just was an airplane I saw this morning. But I like this stuff. It’s interesting, and there’s an intersection with our faith that I really enjoy.

Anyway...sometimes, telescopes like the Hubble will focus in on some spot in the universe that seems to have nothing in it. A few years ago, the Hubble telescope stared at one tiny little spot in the universe like that. From earth, the size of this spot would be one thirty-two millionth of the night sky. It's just a speck of darkness in the night sky for us. And the Hubble stayed focused on that one spot for a few days. And you know what it found in that one little spot? 5,500 galaxies! Not 5,500 stars...but 5,500 galaxies – through a window of space that is $1/32,000,000^{\text{th}}$ of the night sky!

I'm not sure I can adequately put to words the concept that's in my head, but I'll give it a shot: The cross of Christ is like that window, through which we see a whole new way of knowing God and a whole new way of living. Paul opens this up for us with these words that “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” **When you look at the cross of Christ, you see through it to the endless love of God and the endless possibilities of our faith expressed in love.**

The cross of Christ is a single event in the history of humankind; It's a pinpoint on the tapestry of humanity. It's like that $1/32,000,000^{\text{th}}$ of the night sky, but it's in the timeline of human history. And when you zero in on this pinpoint that is the cross of Christ, you realize it's a window into so much more... It's a whole new way of relating to God and a whole new perspective on life. It's like finding 5,500 galaxies through a tiny window in the night sky. **The cross opens up a whole new way of thinking; a whole new way of looking at life; a whole new way of understanding God and relating to God; and a whole new way of living. *And this way is defined by love.***

This should come as no surprise. Jesus says that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” (This verse not only helps us with the “love” part, but we see here the cross as Jesus is given, we see faith – “whoever believes” – and we see more than meets the eye – “everlasting life” – so this verse is a microcosm of the whole point I'm making here, though I didn't think about all of that until this morning.) The letter of 1 John bluntly says that “God is love” (1 John 4:16). So love is at the core of who God is. Much like

discovering 5,500 galaxies through a pinpoint in the night sky, faith in Jesus...trusting in his work on the cross...brings something much greater than what first meets the eye. Like the Hubble staring into a spot in the night sky: if you focus in on the cross of Christ long enough, you'll start to see new things you might not have seen before.

First, you'll see God's love for you. Jesus died on the cross for your righteousness, for your right relationship with God. It's the work that we can never do...we can never work to a right relationship with God. Jesus has taken care of it; He was the sacrificial lamb, the once-for-all sacrifice who willingly gave up everything and gave his life for us, so we can have access to this holy God of the universe and God of all time and eternity. Believing that is the faith that Paul keeps hammering home in this letter. The cross is God's love for us expressed...and God loves you.

Second, that love expressed for us on the cross leads to our own life of loving God and loving others. That's how our faith is expressed. Our faith doesn't just reside in our heads, or reside in some doctrinal statements that we say we believe. Our faith isn't just a creed or a mission statement of a church that gets plastered on a church website or tucked away in church bylaws. Our faith in Jesus is actively expressed in love, or it's no faith at all. All that matters is our faith *expressed* in love.

In fact: **The root word Paul uses for "expressing" is the Greek word "energeo".** We get our word "energy" from this. It's definitely active, and most literally it means "works." Paul uses this same word (same root...the word is in a different form) earlier in the letter when talking about their efforts at works righteousness. So he uses it again here...like he's helping them to redefine it, to see that "works" is a part of things, but it's that our faith is expressed as love...it works itself out in love... and that is the only thing that matters. So a true faith show itself by works of love. Or, as it's translated here: it expresses itself in love.

The word for "love" here is "agape." It's not romantic love or love for family or brotherly and sisterly love. As you may know, Greek has four different words for love depending on what kind of love is being described.

“Agape” is a love that is marked by faithfulness, commitment, and an act of the will. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul famously describes agape love like this: **“Love (agape) is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8 on “Agape” love).**

This is the kind of love God has for us, and this is the kind of love that our faith is marked by. It gives, it sacrifices, it is humble, it is truthful, it honors others, it perseveres, and so forth. It’s not built on feelings or based on what we get out of it. It’s a selfless, “committed no matter what” kind of love. That’s God’s love for us and it’s how we express our faith as well. And as Paul says: it’s the only thing that matters. Your faith, my faith – our faith in Jesus, crucified on the cross at a moment in time and resurrected from the grave three days later – that faith, expressed in love, is the only thing that matters. And as I think about this statement from Paul, I wonder: **Is my faith, is your faith, is our faith together as a church...is it “expressed in love” in such a way that people would say it’s the only thing that matters?** Would people look at us and say “Wow, their faith is clearly the top priority for them, and it always is expressed in love!”

Or is our faith expressed in other ways sometimes? I mean, I’m not perfect, and neither are you...but it’s worth acknowledging and recognizing that:

If our faith is expressed in judgmentalism, it misses the mark.

If our faith is expressed in anger, it misses the mark.

If our faith is expressed in greed, it misses the mark.

If our faith is expressed in pride, it misses the mark.

If our faith is expressed in jealousy, lust, selfishness or anything else along these lines....it misses the mark.

Our faith in Jesus, expressed in “agape love,” is the only thing that matters. As Paul writes in verses 13 and 14, it’s marked by a humble spirit,

and loving our neighbor as ourselves, as Jesus himself said to do. Otherwise, we will devour and destroy each other.

So, to use the metaphor Paul uses in verse 7: let's keep running a good race. Let's stay centered on Jesus, placing our faith only and always in him and not in anything else. And let's keep expressing that faith through love, knowing that God first loved us, we love him back and then we love our neighbor as ourselves. What opportunities is God giving you to express your faith in love? Who has God put in your life that needs some encouragement, needs to know they're not alone, needs to know there's a light at the end of the tunnel and the light has a name, and that name is Jesus?

Or maybe you are the one who needs to be loved. Maybe you are struggling with, or even broken by, your sin...or someone else's sin...or you're grieving a loss, or you're simply unsure of the next step in life. Or perhaps you have missed the mark and devoured or destroyed relationships rather than expressing your faith with an agape love. Maybe faith expressing itself in love needs to begin with asking forgiveness or extending forgiveness or just reaching out for help and asking someone to walk with you through some difficult season of life. There are people here at Rose Hill (and I'll raise my hand and be first in line) who will do that because of Jesus and because of our faith in him that we desire to express in love. If you're a part of the Rose Hill Church family, you probably know that. You have probably been loved on by others – maybe not perfectly, but I'm sure you've been blessed. If you're new to the family, then welcome! Come experience faith expressed in love. We're not perfect at it, but we serve a perfect God who loves us flawlessly and expressed it profoundly through Jesus on the cross.

So, my hope and prayer is that your faith and my faith would be completely centered on Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. May our faith not just be some belief statements or doctrines, but instead, I pray that the cross of Christ would be a window into a whole new way of *knowing* God's love and a whole new faith that works and *expresses* itself in love as well. Let's pray...Amen.