

## The Only Thing That Counts

Gal 5:6, 13-15

- I. Introduction – When considering what to preach on today, for the past 1-2 months, I thought of the fear of God. Wife suggested the love of God or loving others. I wavered some as I prayed and considered, but then I listened to a book called the fear of God by Michael Reeves titled. *Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord*. After that I knew that I wanted to preach on the fear of God. Praying, I believed God led me to Philippians 2:12-13 as anyone who did the readings for this week might have seen. I had studied and prepared for that sermon for the past month. I met with my friend Cyrus Mason earlier this week and shared some of what I was studying, and he jokingly said something like, “I’m sure something will come to you on Friday, and you’ll come up with something just like in India.” And in my mind, I thought “No way”, because I was in the end stages of preparation, I looked at the uses of “fear” and “trembling” and why Paul chose those two terms for how we work out our salvation. They are used throughout the Bible and is the inward response of sinners saved through grace who come into the presence of the Holy Creator and Redeemer God. Trembling Isaiah in his vision of God’s throne, silent Job before the Lord or “astonished” Peter after his miraculous catch when he said on his knees “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:8) Each believer worked out our salvation with “fear and trembling” because we’re doing it in the very presence of God, like earlier believers, only more as the Holy Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifying Triune God is dwelling within us and He is the one working in us to desire, enjoy and to be able to do what pleases Him. Well, that was some of what my sermon was going to be, but then something happened later in the week so that Friday morning, just as Cyrus had predicted, it seemed as if God was leading me to preach on an entirely different text, about loving one another as my wife had encouraged me last month. I thought “Is this foolish? Am I crazy to shift to something entirely different on such short notice!?” I continued to pray, asked my wife and later the other elders. Meanwhile I began working on a new sermon.
  - a. Let’s read the text – Galatians 5:6, 13-15
  - b. Pray – One holy God, the lover of our souls, our Helper and Defender, Refuge and Strength draw near to us Your church now as we draw near to You. Open up Your precious and life-giving Word to us this morning. Guide us all into truth in the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit unchanging from before the foundation of the world to this moment and into eternity. We all need You, may You open my mouth to say what is good for building up, fitting that it may give grace to those who hear and open each of our hearts to receive Your Word deeply rooted in good soil that it may produce in our midst a harvest of righteousness. Amen
- II. Passage Intro
  - a. While Paul wrote to Philippian believers in the last epistle, shortly before his death, this letter to the Galatian churches was his first epistle shortly after planting these churches on his first missionary journey.
  - b. After Paul left, the churches, most likely in the Roman province of Galatia part of modern-day Turkey, false teachers come in. Preaching to these primarily Gentile

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converts that in order to be saved need to be circumcised. Paul demonstrates his authority as an apostle, then vigorously rejects this false teaching through chapters 1-4. In chapter 5 he begins to apply these truths to Christian life, announcing that “For freedom Christ has set us free”, and in 5:4 that if a person accepts a false Gospel that ANYTHING other than faith, in the person and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross is necessary for salvation that they are “severed from Christ” and “fallen away from grace.” It is hard to imagine anything more important to Paul or a way to say this more forcefully.

- c. In the next verse (5): “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.<sup>1</sup>” – Rather than anxiously striving to perfect some outward sign like circumcision to mark us as being righteous, Paul says that the true believer who hopes in Christ alone is indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit to have a secure, settled confidence that God is going to bring to completion their perfect righteous when they meet Him face-to-face, either when He comes again or when death brings us into Heaven with Him. This is the hope of each and every believer here. Jesus is coming again at a time no one knows but God and each of us will face Him after death. Do you have a settled confidence that Jesus’ sinless life and death on the cross allows you to eagerly look forward to His coming or meeting Him after death? If not, could I invite you to confess your need for a perfect Savior and receive Him as your Savior today? If that is you, please speak with any believer here today about how to talk to Him about receiving a certain hope of His righteous life at His coming today.
- III. And yet despite such strong language directed against being circumcised as a condition for salvation, at the beginning of our text, Paul says: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Galatians 5:6)
  - a. So, Paul is saying that it’s actually not about circumcision at all, but rather “faith working through love”.
  - b. In fact, he seems to be saying that he really couldn’t care less whether someone circumcised or uncircumcised. What matters to him and by extension to God is “faith working through love.”
  - c. So, the obvious questions to ask are:
    - i. Whose faith?
    - ii. Whose love?
  - d. Let’s look at these questions:
    - i. First - Whose faith? – The easiest one for us who are familiar with our Bibles and even the book Galatians. From the end of chapter 2 and up through chapter 5, verse 5 as we just discussed, Paul is insisting the only salvation God has ever provided for His people is by faith and that the law can only condemn, though it may point us to our need for faith. He is also very careful to say this was just as much true for Old Testament believers as it is for New Testament believers. He says it is true for

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 5:5.

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Abraham, quoting Genesis to say that Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” (Galatians 3:6) And in Galatians 3:11 he quotes the Old Testament minor prophet Habbakuk who writes in Habbakuk 2:4 “but the righteous shall live by his faith.” We are saved by God’s grace by faith alone in the work of Christ alone. This is a faith given us by God that is working here by the power of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25).

- ii. Second - How can we know we have God-given faith? It works. And the way it works is through love. Whose love is this? One of the clues is that the verse begins “For in Christ Jesus”. In Him, it doesn’t matter if you are circumcised or not, the only thing that matters is faith in Him working through love. This verse is within the section where Paul begins to introduce how the life of faith will be lived out, starting in 5:1a “for freedom Christ has set us free;” that love that flows from faith, and that love that comes from being “in Christ”. The gift of faith in Christ is what sets us free to exercise love towards one another, love that comes from Christ. When we look elsewhere in Scripture, we confirm this e.g. 1 John 4:7, 10, 19; Romans 5:5
- iii. \*\*\*So, our faith given to us by God is working by the power of the Spirit in love, which is also given to us in, through and by Christ
- e. Circumcision as being a requirement for salvation is an issue that Paul would probably have died for. To preach anything that is required for salvation other than true faith in Christ is what Paul called a “different gospel” as said in the opening chapter, no matter who preached it – another pastor, himself or even an angel, “let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6-9). But Paul goes on to describe situations he’d experienced in his life and ministry that show just how contentious the issue of circumcision and observing Jewish food laws was. It even threatened to divide the Apostles at times. (2:11-14)
  - i. But v6 says “In Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything” in comparison “to faith working through love”. In fact, he says it’s the “only” thing that counts.
  - ii. Circumcision in Paul’s day clearly had more than a small potential to impact the Gospel and yet he said whether someone had been circumcised or not didn’t count for anything, when put alongside “faith working through love” for those who are “in Christ Jesus”.
  - iii. IF that was the case for the contentious issue of circumcision, what about contentious doctrinal issues that have the potential to divide us today?
    1. Reformed theology vs. Arminianism
    2. Denominationalism
    3. Old vs. Young earth
    4. Eschatology views
    5. Models of church government
  - iv. Do any of these rise to the level of potential threat to the Gospel that circumcision had in Paul’s day? Maybe, but not really. It’s tough to admit,

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especially if you have strong feelings on one or more of these positions, but can't we say about each of these after our Lord, In Christ neither reformed theology nor Arminianism counts for anything, but only faith working through love. In Christ, neither old nor young earth counts for anything, but only faith working through love. Dare I say masking nor unmasking? And this list could go on and on, couldn't it?

- v. This doesn't mean you should stop seeking or trying to understand ways of God more clearly and accurately or stop learning theology or seeking to grow the purity of our churches, but that in the end, the only thing that will count is true faith in God that will inevitably work itself out through love. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13 summarizes this so beautifully. The highest spiritual gifts, the deepest theological knowledge, the strongest faith or most lavish generosity without love are worse than worthless. In the end the only thing that counts is "faith working through love."

### IV. How then does faith work itself out through love?

- a. Verses 13-15 help answer that. Read 13-15 and display on slide.
- b. In paragraph just above (verses 7-12) Paul forcefully concludes any refutation false teachers afflicting the Galatian church, that are teaching that circumcision for salvation.
- c. While it's not possible to know all the issues facing the Galatian church, beyond the false teaching on circumcision, it appears that there was division and in-fighting amongst the church. This probably involved doctrinal issues over salvation, but commentators also wonder about social, economic and ethnic tensions. It may have started with the false teachers but now it seems members were getting into the act.
- d. In these verses Paul lays out just two possible courses with very different outcomes
  - i. Option 1 - True Christian freedom:
    1. Freedom not to sin, freedom to obey God and love others glorious birthright of every single Christian believer. We're not going to be perfect – no way, but each of us who is in Christ is made perfect by His blood and are being formed into His likeness. It's inevitable if we abide in Him. It's not possible not to grow keep our eyes on Him through His Word, prayer and fellowship.
    2. At the end of v13 and in v14, Paul says true Christian freedom means to serve one another through love, and that the entire law could be summed up in effect by one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
    3. What an amazing claim by Paul. How easy it is to forget the only thing that counts – "faith working through love"
    4. So, option 1 is true Christian freedom and we're filled with the love of Christ through faith in Him to fulfill the law in selfless service – "faith working through love". By this the Body of Christ is built up.

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- ii. Option 2 – The devil’s counterfeit freedom, known as License. I can do what I want, say what I want, think what I want. I know best and nobody can tell me what to do.
    - 1. Aspects are very appealing to our flesh. In the US where autonomy and independence are highly prized, we may have even a little more trouble submitting to God’s ordained authority structures and serving one another in love
    - 2. But just as the inevitability of individual growth in Christ and building up of the Body from true Christian freedom, Paul shows inevitable outcome of counterfeit, license - enslavement in later verses in the chapter and in v15 – biting, devouring and being consumed by one another. One commentator has said the Galatians had a “license to kill”.
    - 3. In our current season in LEFC, we don’t have to look too far to see the reality of what Paul is saying. While I’m trusting the Lord that He loves His Body and He will bring His good purposes through preaching of His Word to each of my brothers and sisters here in spite of my limitations, and the reason I believe He led me to change the text for this sermon two days ago, is because it related to my sin in what God is doing in my heart with these verses.
    - 4. In a conversation with a brother and sister earlier this week, I lost sight of love in my pursuit of truth. I’m even wondering that when engaging in dialogue with another brother or sister in an area of disagreement, can I really say anything true without sounding like a clanging gong unless the reality that nothing ultimately counts except faith working through love is the foremost in my mind?
  - iii. I’m not certain of the answer that question, but what I am sure of is the certainty of the contrast Paul makes in these verses. Exercising true Christian freedom by serving one another in love in submission to God fulfills the law and builds up the Body. Exercising counterfeit freedom in license causes us to bite, devour and consume one another and tears down the Body.
  - e. In the remainder of his letter Paul goes on to explain how to do the first and avoid the latter: Galatians 5:16; 25-6; 6:1, 2, 9-10
- V. Conclusion – We’ve gone through a lot together in the past several months. On top of normal stresses of strains of life – work stress, financial strains, personal illness or sickness or death of a family member or friends, as a church we’ve faced the prospect of Dan’s retirement, the search for a new pastor, elders moving away and distrust or discord within our body. Each of these can cause hurt, confusion, anxiety. The peace and unity we like to see within our Body is threatened or even at times seems absent.
- a. In the midst of all of this speaks God, “in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.... For

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the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.""

- b. As God is teaching me these things, my wife said it is as if I'm learning a new language, the language of love. Fortunately, through the Spirit of God many of you, my brothers and sisters know this language very well.
  - i. This week one of our long-time members shared a letter with the elders. He allowed it to be shared and so I'll share a brief section from the end of the letter: "To all, as I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, we are brothers [and I'll add sisters] in Christ. John Young frequently uses the imagery of a Band of Brothers which is apt considering we are in a constant state of warfare. Not with each, but against the World. (Eph 6:12) It is never Us versus Us because a house divided cannot stand. Rather it is us versus the World. Anger, bitterness and resentment have no place in our conversations."
  - ii. Secondly after my apology to one of our brothers and sisters this week, here is part of their reply: "We who have been forgiven much cheerfully forgive the infinitely lesser offense."
  - iii. There are so many others I could also quote. The point is this: to quote an old phrase, 'When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.' In our text today, Paul lays out two paths with very different and inevitable outcomes. The Galatian church was facing a very serious issue in circumcision being preached as necessary for salvation. We face serious issues too, but maybe not that serious. Paul vigorously rejected a false Gospel, and we too must staunchly defend the purity of the Gospel, but when it comes down to it, he offered the Galatian church just two paths: to serve one another through love thus fulfilling the law and filling up the church or to bite, devour and consume one another untethered from the law of love, tearing down the church.
  - iv. It's the same two paths we and every church face today and by the grace of God I know in the Lord which one you'll be taking to the praise of His glory and grace. Hallelujah!! Praise Jesus.

VI. Pray.