

Faith expressed through love

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[0 : 00] Well, we've been looking at Galatians for some weeks now, and I wonder whether you've been, as you've been following along, that some of these questions may have come to your mind.

You see, Paul's been talking about the gospel, which teaches that salvation is by faith in Jesus alone. No one is justified or made right before God through keeping the law or through works.

It's 100% faith in Jesus. And so that's great news. And yet, perhaps you may have been wondering, what's next? What are we to do as Christians afterwards?

Do we just sit back and do nothing? And why hasn't Paul, for instance, talked much about Christian living? Well, to be fair to Paul, he has said a little about it.

Back in Galatians chapter 2 and verse 14, he wanted Peter to act in line with the gospel or in line with the truth of the gospel. Or in verse 20 of that chapter as well, he says, this life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.

[1 : 07] And yet, Paul's focus has been on faith in Jesus because he wants to drum this truth home. You see, I suspect that it's the Galatians' eagerness that may have tempted them to the law in the first place.

They too may have wanted to know what's next. Now that I believe in Jesus, what's next? And the easy answer is to obey the law, to be circumcised, to observe the food laws, the kosher laws, to celebrate the festivals, you know, tangible things that they could point to, to show that they're living the faith.

So Paul has been at pains to show them that actually, no, this is the wrong way. But now it seems Paul's ready to move on after two chapters of talking about justification by faith.

Because being a Christian saved by faith doesn't mean that there's no need for fruit from that faith. That there's no need to show, to have anything to show for it.

Rather, as the title says tonight, true faith will express itself in observable chains in our lives, in love.

[2 : 23] Now, it's been a while since I've been scolded by anyone. I remember it happening once when I was 16. It was a new school. The teacher wasn't impressed with my attitude.

And so, pulled me aside to give me a good lecture. And you know how when people get excited when they're scolding you, they often don't present their arguments in a methodical, calm, or sequential fashion, do they?

Rather, there's always just jumping from one topic to another, lots of rhetorical flourishes, you know, and then they just keep throwing multiple points all in at once. Now, what did you think you're doing?

Should I report this to your parents? Even a primary school kid could do better than you. And blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Well, you know, I took a point on board. Yes, I did.

I became a better student. But you get the same sense, I think, when you read tonight's passage. Because Paul's full of emotion. And his points, particularly in this chapter, don't seem to flow in a logical fashion.

- [3 : 24] Rather, there's a bit of to-ing and fro-ing. So, I actually found it a bit hard to put a logical outline together. But I think I did manage to put something together of sorts.
- And so, I've divided this passage up into three sections. And it's a bit like a sandwich. Because Paul starts and ends with what's true. True faith and true freedom.
- And then in the middle section, he points out the danger of what's false. Well, that's my best attempt anyway. But hopefully, it will help us to understand the passage.
- His aim, though, is actually pretty clear. He wants the Galatians to stay on the right path. And not to stray onto the one the agitators were advocating.
- So, let's begin with the first section. And we begin where we left off last week in verse 1. Where it says, 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.
- [4 : 24] Now, I won't rehearse what I said again from last week. But essentially, Paul says that Christ and his death has freed us from obeying the law. So, let's not enslave ourselves again by trying to obey the law to be justified.
- Then in verses 2-4, Paul warns them that even to obey one aspect of it, that of circumcision, would be tantamount to alienating themselves from Christ and from his salvation.
- So, reading on, verse 2. Mark my words. I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.
- Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ.
- You have fallen away from grace. Now, Paul singles out circumcision because that's probably the thing that the Jews were pushing. For them, that's what initiated Gentiles into Judaism.
- [5 : 32] But if they did it, then Paul says, they've obligated themselves to obey the whole law. It's a bit like when you put down a deposit for your house purchase, in the future, perhaps.
- It's only an initial deposit, but by handing it over, you've signaled your commitment to buy the whole house, to pay the full amount. And so it is with circumcision.
- This initial but painful step signals your commitment to the rest of the law. And if that's what their commitment was, Paul says, then they've committed to justification by works, not faith.
- And when they do that, they've alienated themselves from Christ, and they've fallen away from grace, God's free gift that he's given to them to be saved. No, Paul offers them another alternative, the right one.
- And he says in verse 5 and 6, For through the Spirit we eagerly await, by faith, the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.
- [6 : 39] The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. You see, when we first put our faith in Jesus, we're justified or declared righteous before God by faith.
- It happens immediately at the point of faith. And yet, this faith needs to be a lasting one. Our aim is to still be believing in the end. That's why Paul can speak of it as something we hope for.
- We want to be declared righteous by faith, not just at the start, but at the very end as well. So what is it then that will sustain our faith?

Well, Paul says it's by the Spirit given to us, not just to believe at first, but to help us to keep believing so that we don't fall away. So it's not circumcision or uncircumcision, not obeying the law or doing good works, which makes our faith more secure.

Rather, it's the Spirit at work in us. And Paul says the tangible fruit we see from the Spirit's work is faith expressing itself through love.

[7 : 49] The Spirit nurtures our faith, which then translates into acts of love. And so the mark of a Christian is love. And the mark of a growing Christian is someone who is increasing in love.

But we are motivated by faith expressed in love. That's something that comes from within us rather than being coerced by external rules and laws telling us we have to do this or do that.

Perhaps let me give you an example or two to see if I can be a bit clearer. So take, for instance, coming to church regularly. Now, if you've come to my baptismal class, you would recall me saying that regular church attendance is a good habit.

Because when you come to church, others can encourage you to keep living by faith. You hear God's Word and it strengthens your faith. You end up serving others as well.

And that helps you to grow as a Christian. So it's good to come to church. And yet, I stop short of making it a rule. I never say, for instance, that you can only be a Christian or remain a Christian if you come to church.

[9 : 02] Because that would take away from faith in Jesus. But it also risks imposing on a believer an external rule that really God wants to shape in us from the heart, to create a desire from the heart to want to come to church because we're motivated by love for God rather than by this rule that says you have to come.

And that's the kind of internal motivation that the Spirit kindles to fan our faith into flame. It's the same, for example, with prayer as well. Our love for more people to be coming to Kingdom Growth Night or to be praying regularly at home.

Again, that's because prayer strengthens our faith in God. It's an expression of our dependence on Him. But again, if I turn what is an encouragement to do something into a compulsion to do it, then what it risks doing is stifling faith expressing itself through love.

It becomes something that we feel we just need to do in order to show that we're a good Christian. So spiritual habits are good. It's, you know, an expression of faith.

But if they become an end in itself and we end up bypassing faith or becomes a substitute for faith, then that's bad. It becomes just rules.

[10 : 28] It becomes like keeping the law. It becomes like doing good works. And so that's the sort of fine balance that we need to exercise. Yes, we should encourage each other to show true expressions of faith through all sorts of good work, through all sorts of acts of love.

But we mustn't turn them into rules that suggest that we need to do them in order to remain as Christians. We must help people understand why we do them.

That in light of the cross, in light of the freedom that we have because of Jesus, we're acting not as slaves to these things, but out of love for God and for other people.

So in verses 1 to 6, true faith expresses itself through love. By contrast, in the next section, the false teaching of the Jews does great harm to the believer, the church, and the preaching of the gospel.

So reading from verse 7, you were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.

[11 : 39] I'm confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves. Now again, Paul repeats stuff.

He's already done so in the rest of the letter. But again, in summary, Paul makes the following points. First, in verse 7, that those who insist on obeying the law are false teachers who are leading the Galatians astray.

The Galatians were on the right course. They were obeying the truth. But now, ironically, by obeying the law in order to be saved, they are being led astray.

It's not what God has called them to. Second, even a smidgen of this sort of false teaching will spread throughout the church. Something like circumcision may not seem like a big deal, Paul says.

[12 : 45] After all, Paul himself and the other Jews, Christians, were circumcised as well. But as Paul has already said earlier, if we start with circumcision, then it will quickly spread to the entire law.

And everyone else in the church will also feel the pressure to join in. I remember some 30 years ago, if you were alive, and a Christian, you might remember this.

There was this big thing that was sweeping churches across the world and it was called the Toronto Blessing, where people were caught up with the phenomenon of being slain by the Spirit or entranced with holy laughter or things like that.

Now, to put aside all the other dangerous aspects of what happened, but I think the effect of it, as I observed it as a young teenager, was that it was like yeast working through dough.

Even though no one suggested that you had to experience these things to be safe, and yet people, when they heard about it, were drawn or tempted to seek out these experiences. They were envious when they heard other people had.

[13 : 52] It's spiritual formal, isn't it? Fear of missing out spiritually. And it made those who didn't have it feel like they were second-class citizens, regardless of how valid the experiences were in the first place.

And that's a bit like what's happening here with the Galatians when they started going down this track. That's why Paul is so harsh with his condemnation, saying that the one who's throwing them into confusion will pay the penalty for it.

They will face God's judgment. Now, today, that may not be the issue. This Toronto blessing has passed, but there's always some other thing, isn't it, that people are pointing to that says, oh, it's this faith in Jesus plus this.

And once we say it's plus this, people start getting, oh, I need to have this plus thing, don't they? Otherwise, they think they're missing out. Well, third, Paul explains how this teaching from the Jews is actually opposed to his own preaching and the gospel.

Now, Paul is a former Pharisee. He once preached circumcision himself. That is, he preached obedience to the law. But now that's all changed and as a gospel preacher, he finds himself being persecuted for it because of his message, because his message was offensive to the non-Christian Jews.

[15 : 14] And I think that what Paul is saying is that even the Jews knew that the message of Jesus was not compatible with their own religion of Judaism. And yet, these so-called Christian Jews coming from Jerusalem were pretending that they could have faith in Jesus and obedience to the Jewish law.

But no, Paul says, the cross is offensive to Judaism because it undercuts the very thing they relied on to be saved. They relied on their own righteous deeds and the cross just nullifies all those things.

And so, Paul's anger is so great against the agitators that in verse 12, he goes, you know, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves. It's actually, I think, a very cruel play on words because circumcision is merely, you know, a small cut, isn't it?

Removal of foreskin whereas emasculation is castration. But that's effectively what they're doing. They're being emasculated from the true power of the gospel.

They're nullifying the full atoning work of Jesus' death on the cross. Well, I think, finally, with verse 12, Paul is done with the agitators.

[16 : 31] He's had said enough, I think, of them and he's hoping that the Galatians were then now, having heard what he's written, stop flirting with their teaching.

But Paul, in the final section, he returns to his theme at the start of the chapter. He returns to the freedom of the gospel and to love as the expression of true faith. So in verse 13, we read, you, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh.

Rather, serve one another humbly in love, for the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself. If you bite and devour each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other.

Now, if you ask me, I think these few verses are really a masterstroke from Paul because the Galatians can actually keep the law if that's what they really want to, but how they do it, Paul says, is by loving others.

Love your neighbor as yourself. If you really want to keep the law, love yourself, love your neighbor as yourself because that fulfills the entire law, Paul says. And while being a disciple of Jesus means we're truly free, free from having to obey the law to be safe, Paul urges them not to use this freedom to indulge the flesh, that is to indulge our sinful nature with its desires, and we'll get into more of that next week.

[18 : 01] Instead, Paul says, use this freedom to love one another. And again, there's another play on words here because the words to serve humbly in the Greek actually means to be a slave.

So, can you see what Paul is saying? Paul says, we are to use our freedom from slavery to sin in order to be then willing slaves in love to one another.

Now, in one sense, we are always enslaved to something because when we make something our goal and passion, be it our career, family, wealth, or course, or something, it becomes our master, doesn't it?

Demanding our time and our effort and our energy. And so, when Paul says Jesus has set us free, what Jesus has done is to set us free from being slaves to our sinful desires.

We're no longer mastered by them. He frees us from having to be selfishly seeking only to please and indulge ourselves. But the question then becomes, once we are free, where are we going to direct now our allegiance?

[19 : 08] Where, who should we now be serving now that we have the freedom to choose? And the answer, of course, as Christians is that we serve God and His Son, Jesus. And in turn, what God tells us to do is to direct our efforts and our energy to serving others in love.

But the importance now, the important difference now is that we're not doing it because we have to or because we have no choice, but no, we're doing it out of a willing heart.

we're motivated by love. Just as Jesus served us, not because He had to, but because He loved us. He willingly gave His own life for us in His death so that we can be saved.

And so, our love is actually a response of our faith in Him. But the thing is, as it says in verse 14, this was always meant to be the motivation for the law.

that was what Israel was meant to be motivated by. If you read the law and we read a small snippet of it tonight, you see that many of the laws actually relate to how we are to treat and love one another, don't we?

[20 : 20] So, I'll give you a few examples. In verse 13 of Leviticus 19, which we read, it says, do not defraud or rob your neighbor. That's how you care for them. Do not hold back the wages of a hard worker overnight.

Or verse 16, do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. In other words, Israel wasn't meant to obey the law to show how righteous they were.

They were, first and foremost, to do it to love God. And then secondly, it helped them to love one another by obeying the law. And punctuated throughout the Leviticus reading tonight, in fact, five times in just this short reading which Johnson did, and I think he emphasized the refrain, the phrase was, I am the Lord.

I was there in verse 16, for instance. That is, God says, obey my laws because the law reflects who I am. Love one another because I, the Lord, have loved you with a steadfast love.

Which, as I said already, we now, as Christians, can see in the love of Jesus for us. And just, just so I finish this a little bit, just by way of an aside, this love that the Bible talks about, this love that Paul talks about in Galatians, is not love that we define for ourselves either.

[21 : 42] We don't choose to love as we see fit, nor is it based wholly on how we feel. Because right at the start of chapter 19, and I've got it on the slide, God begins by saying, be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

That is, the kind of love, love that is the right love, is holy love. And God is the one that defines what love really should be like. Love is not just love.

Love is what God defines to be love. But to conclude, let me try and summarize how faith in Jesus relates or translate in Christian leaving.

So on the slide, I've tried to do a bit of, you know, graphic design is not my forte, so just go with the icons that I found on Google. So on the slide, you'll see what we've been trying to say for the past few weeks.

You'll see that trying to look, trying to be made right before God without Jesus looks like this. Humans, or Israel, more specifically, try to get to God by obeying the law.

[22 : 50] And that's, by my red cross, is impossible to achieve. But now, with Jesus, access to God is true faith in Jesus. In return, God gives us his spirit, symbolized by the dove.

But the risk is, with us and the Galatians, is that we then turn to the law, or in our case, the entire Bible, and approach the Christian life as a series of rules to follow and obey.

I think that's the next slide, if I'm not wrong. Yep. But we do that by ignoring Jesus and our faith in him.

Alright? So, yep, Christ has saved us, we've had our faith, but now that we need to live as a Christian, we just look at the Bible and try and obey it with rules. But that is to fall away from grace.

That is to be alienated from Christ. Instead, what we need to do is to obey God's word through the lens of the cross. that is by faith, by remembering that we're saved by grace, that God has demonstrated his amazing love for us on the cross and be motivated by that fact.

[24 : 06] And then, when that happens, Paul says in verse 5 and 6, which we looked at, God's spirit works in us by faith so that it expresses itself in love. It's my little heart in the heart.

So, our love for one another is done in response to faith. And faith is the best evidence and that love expressed through that faith expressed through love is the best evidence of God's grace at work in us.

Conversely, verse 15, if we bite or devour each other like animals, I think that's what Paul is trying to, then we are destroyed by each other because hate is not the expression of faith.

So, brothers and sisters, I'm not suggesting that this should be our constant focus all the time, but if you're ever wondering how your faith is going, then the question to be asking yourself is, how is my love going?

How enslaved am I to others in love? And here, it's easy to pat our backs and think, oh, you know, the people that we find easy to love, our friends at church, yeah, we're doing well on that front, but what about those that keep hurting or annoying us?

[25 : 22] How are we going loving them? What about those who have gone out of their way to hurt us or annoy us?

Or what about those that we actually have to take the effort to get to know in order to love? Are we growing in love for them as well? When, for example, we read in the Bible that we need to forgive those who wrong us, are we motivated to do so because we're moved by God's forgiveness for us?

Or do we feel, oh, no, not another command. Yep, sure, I've got to obey the Bible, so I'm going to do it because God wants me to do it. What is our attitude when it comes to something like that?

we want to keep praying that the attitude is the former, isn't it? That as God is working by His Spirit in us and we see how much we've been forgiven, that grows from within us that deep desire to want to please God, to love others by loving them and forgiving them.

In other words, we want to be motivated by our faith in Jesus and by the love that is growing as a result of the Spirit at work in us. And the great thing is that I think the longer we live by faith as Christians, then God is indeed doing that.

[26 : 42] We don't have to try harder in that sense because God, by His Spirit, is changing our lives so that we can see the fruit of that faith, that growing righteousness in us and in others.

Not because, you know, we're training ourselves and geeing ourselves up to follow a list of rules, but because having been made right before God, the Spirit of Jesus is working in us, changing us to be like Him.

So in summary, that's how the Christian life works. It's always still faith in Jesus. But as we fix our eyes on Jesus, then what it does is it expresses itself through the Spirit working in us so that we then express it through love, in love, to one another.

So let me pray that God will keep doing that in our lives. Father, we pray for those of us, among us, who lack faith. Please, help us by Your Spirit to put our faith in the work of Jesus.

Help us to see that we can only be made right with You by Your grace. But for those of us who have begun on the right path, obeying the truth, help us to stay on it by Your Spirit, through faith expressing itself in love.

[28 : 08] And with the freedom that is now ours in Christ, help us not to indulge our sinful nature, but use it to serve others in love. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.