

EASTER DAY - Easter Freedom: Faith Working Through Love

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Sam. Do keep your Bibles open. To Jess, congratulations. It is a great night, and especially for those who have been baptized, it's one of those nights that you just remember for the rest of your life. But before we get into that, we're going to get into God's Word.

So again, just looking at the passage there, I'd like you to look at a verse that I think stands out a little bit. It gives you a snapshot of what the Holy Spirit was inspiring Paul to write. Have a look. You might be able to have a guess. It's Galatians 5, verse 12. Read it now to yourself, just in case you missed it before. Remember it. It could be your memory verse for the week. Galatians 5, verse 12. So if you see someone with the number plate, G-A-L-5-1-2, he's probably a Christian. You might want to steer clear of him, though.

Now, this isn't really something that you say in passing, is it? I mean, it's right there. It's right in your face. And it does set the tone for this section, and I'm going to try and stay true to that. So let's pray now.

Bow our heads. Dear Lord, please open our hearts, open our minds. Let us not shy away from your Word. Lord, we pray that as we come into your light, that it would be able to expose us, and that you would be gracious and merciful to us. I pray, Lord, that these words are from you, and that they can be tested, and they be found true. I pray that in your name. Amen.

Amen. So, verse 2. Have a look at that first word written right there. Verse 2, very first word. Listen. So if you're visiting today for the first time, we're in the middle of our series on Galatians, and you picked the right night to come, not only because of the baptism, but also, as you can see from Galatians 5.12, it is getting quite juicy. So Paul says, listen. All the stuff that we've been going through in the past few weeks, understanding that no effort of our own can make us good enough, understanding that it's only through faith in Jesus Christ that we can be made holy, and that our mother is the church. It's all coming to a peak right here.

[2 : 28] Now, as you probably know, the letters from the apostles, they were most likely read out loud to the churches in Galatia during a service, not unlike a sermon. So it's at this point in the sermon when people would usually be sort of leaning forwards a little bit and just starting to listen because this is actually the time where he's getting to that application section.

So that's why, right now, we should make sure that we listen. Now, there are three points for today. First point is this. If you let yourselves be cut, if you let yourselves be circumcised, Jesus means nothing to you. Absolutely nothing.

Now, pretty much expected that. Not that much of a reaction, and that's not exactly, or that's pretty much what you'd expect from most churches in the world today, unlike if you read out Galatians 5.12. You will generally get a reaction from that one.

But when Paul said something like this to the Galatians, I reckon people would have just about been ready to walk out on him. They would have been completely outraged. Now, and Paul doesn't, he doesn't shy away from it. He doesn't just say it once. Like any good preacher, he drives his point home over and over, three times over. So check it out. Verse 2, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

Verse 4, you have cut yourselves off from Christ. Verse 6, in Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. Now, for those of us who have been a Christian for a while, studied the Bible for a while, you probably know why Paul is getting stuck into whether or not they've been circumcised.

[4 : 16] But in order to understand it more, we just need to make sure we get inside the head of a first century Jewish Christian. So let's go there. Now, if I was a devout Jew during Jesus' time, being cut or being circumcised, that's actually my identity. It's God's covenant with Abraham. That's that symbol.

It is the symbol that defines a Jewish man. It means that I can be certain that God's promises, all of God's word are about me, that I'm one of God's people, that I'm God's child. And it's how I know for sure that I'm saved. And so if someone comes in and says to me, you know, all that you think you are, your entire identity means nothing, not happy. Now, when I was in middle school, I joined the Scouts and had a great time going camping, real camping, I mean. And we learned some great life lessons, great mottos like be prepared or do a good turn daily. There's all these sayings like, you know, Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind.

And you get the idea. Anyway, so anyone who's actually been a Scout knows what it's all about, though. It's about merit badges. You'd see those older Scouts and they'd have this big sash and they'd just have row after row after row of badges. And you could see that when somebody saw that, the people would sort of flock to them. And they'd want to either get to know that person or want to know how they got all the merit badges so they could get more. And that's what those merit badges were. They're a sign of achievement. Outer markings that if you threw this guy in the jungle, he'd go man versus wild on you. And not only would this guy survive, he'd cook you a three-course meal plus dessert. Now, for those who haven't seen man versus wild, the star of the show is Bear Grylls, even with a name like Bear Grylls, you know, this guy doesn't need a sash. He's not going to need a merit badge to be able to survive in the wild. And that's exactly the point, though. Paul's not saying, don't wear that badge. He's saying that if you need that badge to tell you you're saved, then Jesus means nothing to you. So Paul asks Peter the question in chapter 2, so I ask you now, are you wearing any badges? Now, I know, I know most of us, our immediate response in our head goes something like verse 5, through the Holy Spirit. So looking at verse 5 there, through the Holy Spirit, all the way to the end of verse 6, by faith in love. We know that it's by faith alone in Jesus, not from any of our works, that we're saved, that we're made righteous.

We know that. The whole circumcision thing, the law, that's a Jewish Christian thing. I know I don't need to be cut there. I know I don't need any sort of a badge like that.

Then again, in our time, we do have symbols, though. We have status symbols, different sort of badges. And I don't just mean designer logos or things on your car. We have titles. So maybe manager or assistant director or something like that. Or little bits of paper with a red wax seal on the bottom. Those take a while to get as well, so they're hard to come by.

[7 : 57] We have these things so that we know where we stand. So that we know that we've reached a certain level. We're able to command a certain respect. So others know that we're qualified.

And so if you went around in those times and you said, you know, are you really a Christian? How do you know that you're saved? Are you really qualified to tell me about Jesus? Well, they'd be able to say, yes, I have a merit badge. Now, I don't exactly know how the first century Christians showed those merit badges, but it was there. It was there.

Now, this is the way our society works as well, though. It is our culture as well. We've been conditioned from young to not only learn from our failures, but learn from our successes as well. And our successes are usually what shape us. They tell us what we're good at.

They teach us how the world works and how the world works for us. So it shapes us. Now, most of us, we haven't been shaped by Jewish traditions, but we do have our own traditions, our own way of doing things, our own lenses that we see the world through.

Now, it might be our family background or culture, even church little idiosyncrasies that we have and the way things are done. So, for example, for the visitors here today, you might have found this.

[9 : 23] This is what I found when I was here. It's about the music. Now, I'm not going to talk about the clapping thing. That's a different issue. Maybe it was just me, but I found when I came. I was sitting there. Song leader asked us to stand up. I went to stand up. Nobody else standing up, though.

So, sort of sitting back down, hovering there. Then everyone else stands up, so I get up. But in the meanwhile, even while we're singing the song, I'm thinking, did I miss something?

Was there some strange cue that everyone knows that I don't as to when to stand up? But after a while, I figured out, yeah, you just have to wait until somebody else stands up. Then you can stand up so you don't feel alone. It was funny, though. On Friday, a good Friday service, somebody stood up really, really early. Everyone else was so confused because they're just looking there going, he's standing up, but the song hasn't started yet, and it's a bit confusing.

So, another example, though. This one's kind of sad, though. Someone who's interested in Jesus, they might come to church, maybe not all the time, but regularly, enough to get to know the Bible and to get to know the people. But then, maybe next week, we don't see them.

Now, of course, there are 101 different reasons as to why that happens. A lot of the time, it might not even have anything to do with us. The times I have been able to follow up on those things, though, one theme has popped up again and again.

[10 : 56] And it's because what they hear and what they see, two different things. They don't match. What they hear is the Bible. Christians should be doing no wrong. They should be kind, loving, humble, all those things. What they see instead, for whatever reason, are people that are grumpy, people that complain, people that forget that verse 5, looking at verse 5 there, that while we're under God's grace, we have the hope of righteousness to come. The hope of righteousness.

One of the early church fathers put it this way, in the book of life, the status next to our name would be righteous. But we don't claim that until Jesus comes back.

Yet so often we do claim righteousness, or at least being more right than others. We might look down on others, or go around thinking about how other people should be doing things, rather than thinking about the things that we should be doing. Instead of seeing our wrongs, we might try to justify ourselves. So I'm going to ask you again, what are your badges?

Is it the number of hours that you volunteer, or you get paid for, or all the facts in your head, or how much you gave to the church building? Or whether you've told every last person that you know at uni or school or work or wherever, if you've told all of them about Jesus?

Is it whether you were baptized as an adult? Or which church you go to? Whether you read your Bible that morning? Whether you prayed three times that day? Now on some level, we do feel good about doing those things, and we should. But please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that loving Jesus, we shouldn't do those things. Loving Jesus, we do those things. We do those things because we want to worship Him, and they should come naturally. We should do those things because we want to honor God. Don't mix up your salvation with the way that you serve.

[13 : 23] Now I could be wrong, but I don't think on the whole we're that naive. I don't think we actually go around saying things like, well, no one else is doing that, so I'm not going to do that. Or we should do it this way. It's always been done this way. Or, you know, you should listen to me. After all, I know more than you do. I think it is like Paul says in verse 7, that we were running well. I'm confident in the Lord that you will not think otherwise.

Confident that you won't think that, you know, any sort of badge or law or way that we do stuff is actually going to make us more right than anybody else. Deep down, most of us know what Paul tells us, verse 8, that such persuasion does not come from Jesus. So what's all the fuss then? Verse 9, a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. And I don't think it's any mistake here that Paul chooses the same words that Jesus does when he's talking about the Pharisees.

The people who believe that laws and rules bring them righteousness. People who believe that those laws give them the right to tell other people what to do. People who are good at looking good, sounding right, who can talk you into any theological or biblical reason as to why what they're saying is right. But the problem is, they still think they're more right than anybody else.

Now, it only takes a little bit of yeast, one, two, maybe a handful of people, to turn a church from a warm, vibrant, loving community to a cold, flat, and legalistic wilderness.

Where people are, they're looking over their shoulders because they're worried about doing the wrong thing. So worried that they're, they don't have time to think about what they could do. What they spend more time is worrying about what they, what they aren't doing or what they could, what they shouldn't do. So they, how are we supposed to bear with each other in love if we're, all we're worrying about is thinking about ourselves. And so sometimes we end up doing nothing.

[15 : 47] So for those few among us, I'll ask a third time. What are your badges?

Stop thinking about the reason why this doesn't apply to you. Stop thinking about all the brownie points you've earned or how much you think you know.

Because the people with badges, that's what they're thinking now. Either that or the thinking of all the other people that should be hearing this. In which case, that judgment, that's your badge.

Stop. Listen. If you're holding others up to your standards, up to your morals, up to your goodianity, if you think that you always know what the right thing to do is, what's best in your eyes, here's what Paul wishes that you would do.

Cut it off. Now in the Greek text, there's a brilliant play on words here. It has to do with circumcision, which in the Greek is which means to be circumcised or to cut.

[16 : 57] So a rough translation of that is verse 2, don't cut yourself. Or verse 4, you will cut yourself off from Christ. Verse 12, these sort of people go ahead and cut it all the way off.

Now that word in verse 12, it's only used one other time in the Bible. And that's in Deuteronomy 23. You can look it up later. But it has to do with people that are not allowed to enter God's assembly.

So take your self-righteousness, cut it off, or be cut off. Now, I looked at the passage and I looked again.

I thought to myself, people aren't going to be comfortable hearing that. And I mean, I seriously, I have no idea who this applies to. I did not have anyone in mind in writing this.

And in my mind, all I'm thinking is, you know, do we know each other well enough to go there? I mean, I'm easily half some people's age. Last time I spoke, I spoke about Jesus rebuking his disciples.

[18 : 09] I'm here I go again on this little angry street. Maybe I'm just some angry guy or sleep deprived or whatever. I am that. But that's not the reason that I'm exploring the path to ministry.

That's not the reason that I have a passion for this. It's God's word. And I'll have that passion to see God's word going into people's hearts.

I can't explain how much I'd love to preach from the next passage. You know, it's a passage about patience or any other passage about comfort or comfort or heaven or perseverance.

The things you do think about when your baby's up crying all night. This is the passage I've been given. I didn't choose it. But it is right there.

It's God's word. That's the reality. And if we didn't need this, if we didn't need Paul's letters, half of the New Testament would not be there.

[19 : 20] And, you know, I was thinking, maybe I can make it more politically correct, tone it down, maybe a little bit more holy. You know, then I wouldn't be staying true to God's word, though. I'd be giving in to that great lie of our age, this religious pluralism, that all you need is love, that all you need is just to get along with each other, that every religion leads to the same place.

So we just love. I remember Paul Barker's words in his last service here, in this building, that if it could be said that if he preached God's word faithfully, he would have fulfilled his calling.

And so if I wear a badge of Mr. Nice Guy and don't ask us to cut it off, then you would have fallen away from grace. Then Jesus would mean nothing to you.

You'd be cut off from him because badges mean nothing. Doing stuff means nothing to our hope of righteousness. Now this brings me to the second point.

It's short and sweet. The gospel is offensive. It's why people persecuted Paul. They were offended at what he was saying. Verse 11, why am I still being persecuted if I'm still preaching circumcision?

[20 : 49] I've got the NIV translation there. It might help if you hear it in a different version. It says, brothers, if I were still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

See, some people thought that Paul was agreeing with them that they should be circumcised. But he's saying, no, if I was agreeing with that, then the offense of the cross would be removed.

And it is an offense. It's an offense to our pride, to our identity. It's an offense because when you remind someone that you're a sinner, they're wrong, and that all your efforts and all your hard work don't mean any difference to your righteousness.

They don't make you any better than anyone else. Every inch of us says, no, that's not right. I mean, I know Jesus died for me, but I've done this, I've done this, I've sacrificed that.

Now, surely that puts me a little bit higher up on that scale. But that's every other way. That's every other religion, except the way that is in Jesus.

[21 : 59] Because in Jesus, he alone makes us right. So the external application, if you say or do things in Jesus' name, don't be surprised if it offends someone.

Again, please don't misunderstand me. We are commanded to speak the truth in love. And sometimes, it does need to be done firmly. But don't be surprised that people don't accept what you're saying.

no matter how many times you change the way you say it. If you're staying true to Jesus, if you're staying true to his mercy, justice as well, then don't change.

Even for those, especially for those who are closest to you. Now, the internal application for ourselves. we have all these values, all the way that we think things should be done.

Or things that we'd like the Bible to say, or things we'd rather the Bible didn't say. Don't be surprised if that offends someone first, if that, sorry, if that offends you first or two. Knowing Jesus, we say, I'm wrong, he's right.

[23 : 10] And it is an exercise of faith to believe that God's word is right all the time. Not just the parts we want to believe.

So, the things that we think make ourselves better in our heads, cut it off. Point two, don't cut off Jesus though.

Because it is just offensive. That's what it is. Instead, replace it with this. Point number three. Replace it with faith working through love.

This is the bit where I get to talk about love. And it is important. But it's not just love. So the beginning, up here you look at verse five. Picking that up, verse five, this comes from the Holy Spirit.

So it comes from the Holy Spirit so none of us can boast. By faith. So an appropriate topic for Easter Sunday, having faith that all these events, all these celebrations that we've been having, all the holidays, they're actually the greatest days in history.

[24 : 19] That on this day, two thousand years ago, after dying in a horrific death on the cross that we deserved, the Son of God rose again.

And in doing so, he defied all those things that control us. Sin and death. And that need to continuously try to prove ourselves.

Faith is believing in that. So, faith working through love. And that's that bottom bit there at the end, verse 13. Through love, become slaves to one another.

That's the sort of love that comes from faith through the Holy Spirit. When we are enslaved to each other, that's faith working through love. And it's such a contrast to the slavery that we've been looking at for over a month now.

Slavery to the law, to Mount Sinai, slaves to the elemental spirits of the world. Don't be slaves to those things. Be slaves to love. To loving one another.

[25 : 22] Now, people have been asking me, you know, how's fatherhood? My answer has been this. It is a great test of character. Because when life just keeps hammering away at you, and you're just completely exhausted, and for the tenth time that day, someone comes up to you and asks for just one more thing.

In my head, I have what my friend calls a Shannon Noll moment. What about me? It isn't fair. You know, haven't I done enough already?

You know, why can't you do that? It's not my problem. It's just not fair. But that's when you pick up if you're serving for any sense of self-indulgence, other than being a slave to love.

So I just try and shut that part of my brain off. Now, that's why Paul tells us that not to be self-indulgent. Because all those laws, all those rules, doing stuff, all it does is become a badge to indulge us.

Self-indulgent people are looking for that pat on the back. Self-indulgent people want people to know that they're qualified to do things. And that's to make up for their own doubts or our own doubts within ourselves, to get the recognition that we think we deserve sometimes.

[26 : 49] because without that recognition we might feel empty. And then we start wishing things would just go our way. Now that's that sort of attitude, that self-indulgence, that's what leads to arguments.

Verse 15, you will bite each other's heads off and devour each other. Now if you've been in a church long enough, in any church, and we're honest with each other, you know this is exactly what happens on a whole range of issues.

I mean, biting each other over church signs or church buildings, how to do things, all in the name of love. You know, somebody thinks this, another person thinks that.

This one looks better. This one might appeal to more people though, or at least we think it might. Hear me clearly again. I'm not talking down the church.

The church is Christ's body. We do not give up gathering. We do not change our idea of what church is to suit what we think it is. That's self-indulgence again.

[27 : 58] And that doesn't mean there aren't any guidelines either. Verse 14, the law can be summed up by the commandment to love our neighbor. Just because we don't follow the laws or the rules, that doesn't mean we throw them out.

Through loving your neighbor, you fulfill the whole law. Not because we need to feel righteous though. but by faith, working through love. Now next week, we're going to get the gold standard of how that works.

So don't miss out. But for now, don't completely consume each other. I had a chance to talk to a church reconciliation consultant.

There is actually such a profession. As we said, there's lots of things in church that might go sour. So, I asked her, you know, when things do go wrong, they seem to get really messy.

How do you sort through all those shades of gray? How do you know who's wrong? And she gave a very interesting answer. She said, there are no shades of gray.

[29 : 06] There's what's been done God's way and what hasn't been done God's way. So today, on this day, it's Easter Sunday, it's a day of reconciliation.

The very first day in history when we could come before God through Jesus and say, Dad, forgive me. And we would be completely forgiven.

And with this faith, we can love one another and forgive as we have been forgiven. Now lastly, if you have even the slightest bit of angst or hurt towards any of your brothers or sisters, you might be thinking that we're more righteous than someone or better than someone, might be that we've wronged them or they've wronged us or that we think we deserve something from them.

Before you take communion today, so after the baptism, we're going to have communion, before you take that, you come before God and you say to Him, you promise Him that you'll settle that matter before tonight's end.

God, so in future, for all of us, before we indulge ourselves, find the source of why we think we deserve anything, cut it off and love each other as slaves.

[30 : 37] Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you so much that you came down to this earth to save just such hopeless wretches like us.

Lord, please empty us of our pride, our identity that isn't anything else but you. please, Lord, empty us of that and let us be filled with your Holy Spirit.

And Lord, in faith, without doubts there, in faith that you died and you rose again, let us be able to become slaves to one another because we know that we don't have to prove ourselves.

We know that we are no more righteous by anything that we can do. Let us be free in that way, Lord. But instead, let us be slaves and love to one another. We put the rest of this service in your hands, Lord.

Amen.