

The Test

A Series on the Letter to the Galatians

Message 8 – “Perfectionists”

Galatians 5:15; 6:1-5

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Hi I’m David Woolverton and I’m one of the pastors here at St. Paul’s Church. It’s my joy to share with you the Word of God. As we prepare for God’s Word would you join with me in prayer?

Lord God we thank You for Your Word and for the power of that Word to give us life. Lord we pray that You would open us up to Your Word and open Your Word up to us. Father teach us what You would have us learn as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. All of this Lord I pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Last week Pastor Matt made a reference I want to build on. He said that during the season of the pandemic a lot of us have been busy hard at work in our homes doing renovation projects. Right? Ah, well I must admit Kristine and I are in that crowd of renovators. We are renovators, I must admit it.

In fact, I have this ongoing kind of joke with Kristine - it’s this time of year in the summer months, especially when nothing else but Christmas shows are on the Hallmark movie channel, that we tend to turn on HGTV. I swear to you as soon as I hear the music of some of those episodes, I know deep inside my gut that I’m in trouble. I know that something is coming. I know that we are going to be begin some kind of project that’s going to renovate something. Well I must admit it happened just last week. Last week the bug hit us and I ended up with a project which involved some painting. Now, you need to know something about me: I have a love/hate relationship with painting. Right? I absolutely LOVE, LOVE when someone else does it and I HATE when I have to do it. That’s the love/hate relationship. And there’s a story behind that, you have to get to know me in order to understand this. You see, I’m about to confess, I’m being vulnerable here - are you ready? I am, when it comes to painting, a perfectionist.

I really am, and it’s not just about the paint. What really hits me up more than the painting is the prepping. You put a roll of Frog tape in my hands and I gotta’ go to town. I am obsessive with taping everything that needs to be taped along the right edges and oh my gosh, Lord help me when there is a jagged edge that cannot be touched with paint. I am there meticulously making sure that every little crevice, every little cut is absolutely done. It drives Kristine batty! It drives me batty! The project that we had to do just last week literally was a minor project when it comes to painting. Painting wise - it took me all of 10 minutes! Prepping took me 2 hours! **2 hours!** Tape, crevices, corners, perfectionism – it’s not a good combination. Love/hate relationship with painting. And don’t even get me started on wallpapering! We’re not going there today.

Perfectionism - why is it that we often seem to think that being a perfectionist is a great quality? Well, when we are the receiver of the gift that someone else perfectly presents? But it's not always a good character trait when we're not the beneficiary! When we look at the church and relationships within the church, there's a lot that we expect of one another that perhaps we might not expect of ourselves. But there is something very important that we need to realize. In fact, I've been saying this for decades in new member classes. Whenever a group of people want to join the church, I'll say something to this effect:

**Our church is a congregation of imperfect people
working together
to honor and serve our perfect Lord.**

This sounds great, right? It sounds wonderful! We want to be a part of that, except when we're the ones who are offended by something that someone says or does. Then that exposes a deeper part of our personalities, right? We're not alone.

We have been studying Paul's letter to the Galatian church and embedded in the midst of this Galatian experience has been the reflection of a group of imperfect people just like you and me. And the beautiful thing about this is we have here right in front of us in written form, written 2000 years ago, a clear picture of the character of the people of God. ***Imperfect people who make imperfect decisions, who do imperfect actions, who sometimes imperfectly perfectly offend one another and somehow we gotta' trust that God can redeem it all!*** That God can make something good out of all of that. We're not alone!

Paul, the apostle in writing these words of Galatians, was trying to communicate to that group of young believers that they had to get the basics of what it meant to follow Jesus. And one of those basics was that we had to resist chewing each other up. Embedded in a very special verse of chapter 5 is this: He says in verse 15,

If you bite and devour each other watch out or you will be destroyed by each other
(Galatians 5:15).

Powerful words, that's the NIV. There's another translation that literally translates that word "bite and devour" as '**gnaw**'. Anybody have a dog? Do you know what they do with a bone? They gnaw on it. I know our dog does; our dog could literally gnaw on her bone and hours could go by and pretty soon we'll look down on the bone and there's blood on the bone! She was so caught up with gnawing on the bone that she didn't realize she was injuring herself! So that's what we do, Paul says, when we're not watching over what we do and how we treat one another. And when we think of it from that vantage point, we see that Paul is reminding us that we're people of a new covenant. Remember that from the past couple of weeks? We're partners together, imperfect people serving a perfect God together and in that serving of a perfect God, God in His unique way bring all of us together and redeems us because of the new covenant. And the new covenant has something very unique about it, here it is:

**Love is the language of the New Community
that we have in Jesus Christ.**

Now here's the struggle. We have to figure out a way to be fluent in that language. Fluency in the language of love becomes incredibly important because how we treat each other is going to affect our witness to the communities around us. Our fluency in love is going to be a more powerful testimony to who Jesus Christ is than any message that I could preach on a Sunday morning. And that is what Paul the apostle is trying to get at with those Galatian believers. And this is the same Paul that actually taught us, those of us who are willing to read a little bit further, he taught us what he meant by love.

The best illustration is in Paul's other letter to another group of churches; what we call 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Look at what he says,

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs... (1 Corinthians 13:4-6)

I gotta' stop here for a second and just breathe in. I have failed at each one of those so far...how about you? If this truly is a test and I'm gauging how I've done just on that listing, I can tell you pretty honestly that I have failed to be fluent in the language of the new community of Jesus Christ. Let me go just a tad slower here –

"Love is patient, Love is kind"... boy, I fail that anytime I get on route 283, how about you? Love is patient, Love is kind? The reality is this is who I am, I'm just being vulnerable here with you all. The reality is I am very patient with other people, I'm not so patient with myself and I'm not so patient sometimes with my wife, but I'm patient with everyone else, why is that? If Love is patient, love is kind and it doesn't envy and doesn't boast and it's not proud, hmmm... I've gotta learn to be a bit more fluent.

It also goes on to say,

"It does not dishonor others..." ...and that really is the crux of what Paul is getting at in Galatians. Sometimes not meaning to, not purposefully, perhaps unintentionally we tend to dishonor our sisters and brothers in the household of faith. Sometimes we create an environment of dishonor by how we gossip. We don't seek out to hurt anybody, maybe some of us do, but that environment of dishonor begins to gnaw on all of the character of who we are as followers of Jesus.

"It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs."

You know, that's a real clincher in today's world, when someone is doing something wrong or when somebody is failing or falling we're quick to whiz out our phones and capture it so we can be the first to put that on Instagram or Facebook or Snapchat. Because we want to publicly present the record of somebody else's wrong, but how would we feel if somebody did that to us? Hmmm...

Verse 6 says,

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6).

Do we do that? Do we rejoice with the truth? I love verse 7 and verse 8 Paul writes,

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres
(1 Corinthians 13:7,8).

What would the community of the household of faith look like, not just here at St. Paul's but everywhere that the church is, what would the church experience look like if we actually made it a priority to protect one another's reputations? To protect one another's character? Hmmm....

Always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. That word "perseveres" is an important word in the original Greek in the New Testament, if you've been around me for any length of time you've heard me illustrate the Greek for that. It's its 'Hypomenno' in the literal Greek. It's the combination of 2 words, 'Hypo' like, in 'Hypodermic', which means, "under" and 'menno' which means, "to remain". So, it means "to remain under" the thing we are facing; to remain under the thing we are dealing with. And, hear this, because it's going to set the stage for what Paul is getting at in Galatians. It is meant that we are to bear with one another especially in the midst of some really bad things that we're facing. Why? Because he sums it all up in verse 8, **"Love never fails."** Would you say that out loud with me? Those 3 words, wherever you are, are you ready? Love never fails. That's the beauty of what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians. But, he takes it one step further and he moves us into a new lesson for the community of faith and here it is: This is tough, this is going to challenge us, are you ready?

If we don't love one another, we're not really following Jesus.

Why? Because love is the language of the new community in Jesus Christ and we've gotta' be fluent in it.

Now, let's take this back to Galatians. Look at how the apostle introduces chapter 6:
Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently (Galatians 6:1a).

Let's pause there for a second, "brothers and sisters if someone is caught in a sin." That word 'caught' is a very unique word, it means "taken by surprise." Have you ever been caught doing something that was not right? Have you ever been taken by surprise because someone saw you?

Let me tell you this little humorous story that reflects in a small way what we're getting at here. A number of years ago, when I was just beginning ministry, it was early on in marriage, I had been a pastor for just a couple of years. I was still kind of naive and still learning the ropes and newly married so I would do anything for Kristine (and I still would do that) and she was sick with a major cough. I called my Mom who was a nurse for her advice. I said, what do I do? Nothing is working! She said one of the best things that she learned that helps with a pretty severe wheezing kind of cough is Blackberry Brandy. I replied, "Mom, I don't have Blackberry Brandy! I don't have any alcohol in my house!" Calmly she suggested I go to the store and get some? So back then I drove around the block, there was a liquor store next to the local Giant. I looked all around me trying to make sure there were no church people who might get the wrong idea about their pastor coming out of a liquor store, right? So, when I thought that the coast

was clear I went in and of course I didn't know where to look for Blackberry Brandy, so I had to ask! Embarrassment number 1, so I went up to the guy and said, "I'm looking for Blackberry Brandy" and he gave me this kind of strange look and then he pointed me in the right direction. I found it, checked out, paid for the Brandy and they put it in the appropriate brown bag and clinched the top. And so I got that and I walked out of the store and just as I was walking out of the store I ran into somebody from the church. "Pastor David! How are you?" And I found myself having to justify that this was for my wife. And that didn't come out exactly right! "This alcohol was for my wife!" And I was so flustered I forgot to mention that it was because she was sick.

Did you ever get caught? Caught by surprise? Sometimes in the moment of our surprise, our vulnerability is exposed. When we're caught in a sin and the weight of that sin, we may not know what to do. Paul gives us some advice, he says

*Those of you who are more mature in the faith (those of you who have been with Jesus long enough) - you need to restore that other person gently (**Galatians 6:1b**).*

There's two prongs to this, the first is we need to restore them that becomes a priority. Our priority is that we, who are imperfect people trying to serve a perfect God, we are doing it together. So, we need to make a priority of restoring one another, and the onus of that responsibility is on those who have been with Jesus longer. The second prong that goes with that is that we are to restore them gently. Why? Because love is the language of the new community of Jesus Christ and we need to be fluent in that language - Love.

There's more to that verse and Paul goes on he says,

*If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently; but watch yourselves or you also may be tempted (**Galatians 6:1c**).*

So, right now you might be saying, "tempted by what?" He goes on and he says the following,

*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (**Galatians 6:2**)*

What is the law of Christ? It's the law of love. Jesus told those disciples in the upper room, hours before his own arrest and crucifixion, he said "A new command I give to you, you are to love one another as I have loved you, so you are to love one another" (**John 13:34**). Are we loving one another? Loving one another is that law of Christ and Paul is saying we need to carry each other's burdens. He goes on and says,

"If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves".....what's this about? It's seems like it's a clash from what he was just saying, "Carry one another's burdens." It's like, "Okay, we've fulfilled the law of Christ, but if anyone thinks they are something when they are not they deceive themselves." This is actually tying back to when Paul says we need to watch ourselves or we'll fall into

the same temptation? He is now telling us what it is, it's the temptation to think that we are better than the person who was caught by surprise in sin. Hmm... he says in verse 4,

"Each one should test their own actions." Tested according to what? According to the basics, in this case, the basics of love. Are we being fluent in love? Then, Paul says,

...they can take pride in themselves alone without comparing themselves to someone else for each one should carry their own load (Galatians 6:5).

Woah, wait a minute, carry their own load? I thought Paul, that you just told us we are to carry one another's burdens!

Well if we're astute enough we're going to realize that Paul used two different words here and in English they actually translate differently. The first one is we're to carry one another's "burdens" and in here we're also to carry our own "load". What's the difference? The image is a burden, the big picture of a boulder on someone's back that they have to bear the weight of something that is almost impossible to bear alone, compared to "load" which we'll picture as a brick and the brick is maybe a variety of sizes, some are small some are large, but a brick by nature most often can be carried by ourselves. We can lift a brick or two and we may not want to and that's part of the problem, some of us don't want to carry our own bricks, we make our bricks out to be boulders. So, what do we do with that?

One of the principles I use now and it's taken me a long time to learn this is that there's a wonderful question I ask myself:

"Is the person dealing with a boulder or a brick?"

Are you dealing with a boulder or a brick? How do we tell the difference? Maybe we ask the question, "Is the burden overwhelming?" If it is, how can I help share the weight? And critical to that is, while helping, how can I empower the person to stand on their own? And if it's a brick and the person really needs to own their responsibility for the brick I have to ask the question is,

"Whose problem is it, really?"

Because if I'm dealing with the problem but the problem's not really mine, then I'm the one with the problem. Now, I gotta give the problem back to its rightful owner. I need to give the brick back to the one who owns that brick. And presently who's bearing the weight of the problem? If those two answers are out-of-sync, how can I give the problem back to its rightful owner? It's important that we understand that even in the community of faith that we can love someone and say "no" to them. It's an important lesson that took me a couple of decades of my life to learn, but it is a principle of love.

Are you dealing with a boulder or a brick? Friends, if we don't love one another, we're not following Jesus. But when we are following Jesus, love will always find a way. And those of us who have been a part of this relationship with Jesus for longer we need to take the first step. We need to model that love first. Why? Because **we're a bunch of**

imperfect people trying very hard to serve a perfect God together. I challenge you this week to remember what God can do through ordinary, imperfect people. He can paint a whole new picture with you and me both as the centerpiece. Friends will you pray with me?

God we thank You and we trust You. We thank You that You have called us to be part of a community of imperfect people and by doing so, You've created a perfect witness of love. Lord, breathe on us Your Holy Spirit so that the fruit of Your Spirit especially the fruit of love can really shine Your witness to a world that desperately needs it lest all of us be caught by surprise. Lord, use us to point people to the cross and to Your forgiveness, grace and love. All of this I pray in Jesus' name and all God's people said, 'Amen.'