

The Test

A Series on the Letter to the Galatians

Message 6 – “Live in the Already”

Galatians 5:1-

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Well, good morning! It’s good to have you here! It is my honor to share with you the message that God has laid on my heart for all of us today. As we prepare for that message would you join with me in prayer?

Gracious Lord, we give You thanks for this Your Word and we trust Lord that you will open us up to Your word and open Your word up to us. Teach us Lord what You would have us learn as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. Lord all of this I pray in Jesus’ name and all God’s people said, Amen.

Well, we have been on a journey through the entire summer looking at Paul’s letter to the Galatians. We’ve been picturing the Galatian letter, metaphorically speaking, as the apostle’s returned and graded test paper to the church. Paul hands back the test paper back to the early believers in Galatia with a big red ‘F’ on the top of the cover page.

Anybody here ever get an ‘F’? A failure on a test? I have, and it doesn’t feel good at all. I don’t know about you, I wasn’t used to that kind of experience, but when it would occur, oh my gosh I wanted to learn more, I wanted more details and I was one of those people that wanted comments. If there were no comments attached to that grade, I was standing in line in front of the teacher’s desk wanting to know why; I demanded a good explanation. I was a conscientious student, that’s just who I was.

Now, what Paul did in writing this letter to the Galatian church is he gave not only comments, he gave encouragement. And what he did, in his own unique way, was to remind those early believers in Jesus what the basics of following Jesus were all about.

One of those basics was very important and that was:

**Jesus alone was the way for us to approach the heart of God.
Jesus alone.**

Why was that important? Well, what we've learned over the past several weeks is that there was a group called the "Judaizers" that would follow Paul wherever he would go. First, Paul would travel throughout the entire area planting churches, raising up believers, passing along this incredibly good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ and what God did in taking that first step, taking the initiative. He would plant these churches with vibrancy, with the good news abounding so that they, in turn, would go around and share that good news with others. Then, after he left to go share the gospel in other areas, the Judaizers would move into areas he had just left. These "Judaizers" who came from the Jewish sects in Jerusalem would teach them a different message than Paul had. Basically, their message to those new believers was "What Paul told you about this Jesus guy, it wasn't enough. That in order for you to be seen as righteous before God, you actually had to do Jewish things, Jewish rituals like circumcision and certain food rituals and if you didn't you were not quite righteous before God."

And here's the thing, those early believers actually believed the Judaizers. And they started doing those old practices that Israel had once done under the Law of Moses. So what we learned last week is that Paul, in rebuking those early believers was to say, "Hey, you can't forget what the original message was! It's not Jesus plus anything. What Jesus did on that cross was to set us free. And in Christ, we have been adopted. Made part of the family of God. We are sons and daughters - siblings with Jesus himself, siblings with one another, we are the Church, the family of God.

And nothing apart from what Jesus himself did could ever, ever help us to gain access to the heart of the Lord. It's been gifted to us in the freedom that we have in Christ. That is going to springboard to what he says in chapter 5 starting in verse 1. This is what Paul says,

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1)

For freedom, Christ has set us free. The very gift that God gave to us in taking that initiative by sending his Son to die for the sins of humanity on that cross. That was all we needed, it bought us freedom. Paul says it was for freedom that Christ has set us free and so he says why would we want to submit again to the yoke of slavery? Listen what Paul is talking about in simple terms is what we identified last week is the clash between two things. The clash between religion, the old way, the way under the Law and relationship. What we have in Christ, of children of the Most High God, as heirs, heirs to the kingdom of God. By way of illustration, religion vs. relationship can best be contrasted by looking at the evolution of car ignitions. Originally, a fair bit of energy was expended to turn the crank to

start an car engine. However, now there are cars that demand simply the push of an ignition button and the car effortlessly starts up.

Any one of you still have one of those crank engine cars? Do you know anybody who still remembers those old crank engine cars? There's the harsh reality, when you look at religion, the old way of doing things, you put all of the energy, all of the work, all of the sweat and you may or may not get that engine to turn over. But in Christ, it's all we need to do, it's kind of like the metaphor, press a button and the car starts and you're not even in the driver's seat. God took the initiative, He took the first step and because of Jesus and what he did on the cross, that gift cannot be earned. It's given, it's a free gift. And Paul is trying to communicate that clash between the religion of the old way vs. the relationship of being children of God.

So, he continues as he writes,

Listen, I Paul am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again, I testify, every man that let's himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire Law. (Galatians 5:2-3)

Folks, pray for me - I gotta' talk about circumcision. The C word, that word we kept pushing off to the next week, to the next week in this entire sermon series, it's now in front of us, circumcision. Now, before we talk specifically about it, look at what Paul is saying, he says, "*If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you.*" And then he says again, "*If any man allows himself to be circumcised then he is obliged to obey the entire Law.*" In other words what Paul is saying is "If you are going to base your relationship with God solely on the Law, the old religion then you gotta' be all in. You are going to be judged by the Law. But if you are going to put your hope in Christ and what God did in taking that initiative. If you're gonna' identify yourself with the Jesus of the cross and the empty tomb then you will experience the incredible freedom that God has wanted to give to each and every one of us. Religion or Relationship? So, this circumcision thing, for Paul based on what he's describing to the Galatians, his point is that it's not about circumcision itself, it's about what circumcision represented. And when we talk about what circumcision represented, we have to talk about another C word - that C word is Covenant.

You see, circumcision as an identifying marker began all the way back in the Old Testament. You see, when you look at the Old Testament and to some degree in the New, from the vantage point of that word Covenant, we see how God was establishing relationships with His people, trying periodically to get those people to recommit their lives with Him and at each juncture He

established a Covenant within significant moments within history. Along with each Covenant He issued a sign. We know some of those signs. We take them for granted now, but one of the signs was with Noah. After 40 days and 40 nights of rain and flooding of the earth, God began everything anew and He established a new Covenant with Noah. With Noah he said,

I'm going to put my rainbow in the sky as a sign of the new Covenant, a promise that I'm making with you and with all of the people. That I will never destroy the earth again through water **(Genesis 9:11-17)**

Every time I see a rainbow in the sky, I'm reminded of that story. It's a sign of God's promise. There were other signs of God's promise. One of those was with Abraham. With Abraham, God said, "Look up in the sky, can you count the number of stars? It's impossible right? So, I'm going to do with your descendants. I'm going to make your descendants number vastly more than the stars in the sky" **(Genesis 15:5)**. But there's a sign to the Covenant I'm making and that sign is circumcision." **(Genesis 17:1-14)**. Years later God would issue another Covenant with a man named Moses. For the people of Israel were being set free from slavery in Egypt and they had to regroup themselves and so God established a new Covenant with the people of Israel and through two tablets of stone, He issued that sign, what we know as the 10 Commandments **(Exodus 20:1-17)**. It's the 10 Commandments that began to set in motion a new relationship between God and the people of Israel. A relationship that would build a bridge and help them to connect to God's heart. It's that sign of circumcision and the sign of the 10 Commandments that we're talking about here in the Galatian letter. In specific, what Paul says is that, circumcision is an outward and visible sign of a Covenant that was established through Abraham with the heart of God. Just like the Law or the 10 Commandments were an outward sign of the Mosaic Covenant. But you see, for circumcision back then it represented one of those identifying markers that made them not only the children of Abraham, but the children of God in that Covenant relationship.

It was a way that visually but not publicly we could represent that identifying marker as the people of faith. It set them aside from the rest of the world. Just as it was also an act of submission where they would align themselves over generations to the Mosaic Law. But here's the deal, what Paul begins to say is that because of the cross of Christ, both of those were no longer necessary. In fact, what he says to the Galatians is that if you're going to align yourself with circumcision or identify your righteousness as coming through the Law, then you are going to set Jesus aside. You can't have it both ways. From that vantage point, what Paul was communicating to those early believers is that in Jesus Christ there was a new Covenant. A new Covenant. God was establishing a new, now permanent relationship with all

of us, the people of the world (not just Israel). And by doing that He set in motion a shift in the trajectory of history. This is what Paul says in verse 4,

You who want to be justified by the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ (Galatians 5:4).

Pause there for a second. Don't miss the irony of this translation given the topic at hand. Paul reiterates his point in the next few verses:

You have cut yourselves off from Christ, you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by grace we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. The only thing that counts is faith working through love. (Galatians 5:5-6)

Before we leave that passage, read that again. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything." This is so important, so critically important for the Galatian Christians and for all of us. What he's saying is that in Christ because of the new Covenant, all of the old Covenantal signs whether Law or Circumcision, it doesn't matter anymore! We have been set free. There is a new Covenant established through the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross and in that Covenant, we are free! We are free! And that new Covenant becomes a sign of something very important. Namely that we live in the power of the already.

We live in the power of the already. What do I mean by that? Well, Paul says to the Galatian believers that because of what Jesus did on the cross, because God took the initiative, the first step, and established that new Covenant in Christ, we, you and I even 2,000 years later, we live as a people in the power of the already. And that means that

- ***we already are forgiven***

We're already forgiven. Now if you're reading this right now and you're consumed with how dark the shadows of your life have been and you have been consumed by your own sin and you're sitting here or standing there and you're wondering, "Could God possibly forgive me and my past?" The answer is, He already did. He already did. What Jesus did on the cross is that He died, (past tense) for your sin and mine. There is nothing in your past, nothing in your present, nothing in your future that could ever, ever separate from the heart of God when you give your heart to Jesus Christ. You are already forgiven; in addition,

- ***we are already loved***

Every single one of us no matter the past, no matter the present, no matter the future, you're already embraced. God is already hugging you as a member of His family. You are already precious to Him. Third,

- ***we are already welcomed***

We have been welcomed regardless of who we are. Quite frankly, every Monday morning I wake up and look in the mirror I don't even recognize myself. There's something about how we tend to see ourselves but God sees us in ways that are far bigger and far better than how we view ourselves. We are already welcomed into the family of God.

- ***we are also already blessed***

I don't know about you but there are days when I just pray, "Bless me Father, or bless me for this or show your favor upon me for this." And when I pray that way, I hear the voice of the Holy Spirit say to me in my Spirit, "David, you are already blessed! You already favored." Think about this for a second. Every single one of us is already blessed in ways that go beyond our capacity to understand. We live in the power of the already, that means we are already filled and not only filled with all we need we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are already blessed beyond imagination and we are filled to greater capacity than we could ever, ever need. God has reminded us through the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit that residential in potential in each and every one of us is the fullness of the expression of God's love and gifts and Spirit and everything that we need to face into life each and every day.

- ***we are already fully known***

There is nothing about who we are that is hidden from God. There is nothing in the shadows that God cannot see. There is nothing, do you know what? Because we are fully known, because we are fully embraced, because we are fully loved

- ***we are also fully adopted***

Right now, you are never alone, you are never disconnected. Not only are we sisters and brothers in the household of faith we are siblings to Jesus Himself. Children of the Most High God. We are people who live in the power of the already.

We are people who live in the power of the already.

See, we have a new Covenant in Jesus Christ, and you and I in Christ are people of that new Covenant. And for us there's new sign to that Covenant. Signs that help remind us of who we are in Christ. For us there's two. Two outward and physical signs of an inward and spiritual truth that signify to us a connection to the heart of God. The first is baptism. Baptism reminds us that we have been incorporated into the family of God. We are sons and daughters; brothers and sisters and we are never alone. That's why baptism is done is public, in a group, in what we call a Covenant community. It is because it is an outward sign of an incorporating us into the family of faith.

The second sign is communion and we're going to be sharing that in just a moment. And that communion is an outward way for us to remember what Jesus Himself did for us. It's a sign in the new Covenant of His blood. And when we share in communion with one another, when we share in that moment of intimacy with God, we remember what God has done on our behalf. We remember the first step that God Himself took on our behalf. He did it for you, He did it for me and He did it to bring us closer to the heart of God. It's a new Covenant and you and I are people who live in the power of the already.

Friends, as you're reading this right now, there is somebody I'm sure who's been desperately needing to hear that God loves you. That God loves you, you are not alone, you are part of a community, part of a history and part of a plan that God has to bring hope and restoration to this world. You are precious, you live in the power of the already and it's time for us to claim that truth and to live it. Live in the power of the already. All of us need that so that we can be the ambassadors of hope that Paul in 2 Corinthians describes. He's created this for you and He's created this for me. And He's opened up the door for you to have direct access to the heart of your Heavenly Father. I invite you to take that step of faith today. I invite you to put your heart into His hands, I invite you to put your life into the hands of Almighty God, say "Yes" to the God who has said "Yes" to you. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we give You thanks for taking that first step, and by doing so, by sending Your Son to die on the cross You are opening up a new way to access Your heart. Lord, we say "Yes" to Your "Yes" of us. Thank You, Lord for forgiving us, thank You for loving us, thank You for welcoming us, thank You for embracing us, thank You for healing us, thank You for giving us hope. For all of that Lord we thank You that You have made us Your children. It's in Jesus' name that we pray. And all God's people said, Amen. Amen.