

14 June 2009

## The Bottom Line

### Galatians 5:1-6

The roommates I had in seminary were a big part of my experience there. Most of us liked to talk—about everything: from theology to sports to movies to, well, just about anything. We could stretch a conversation about theology deep into the night. Sometimes it was just for fun. I had a housemate for a while who had grown up in the Mennonite tradition—she was a committed pacifist. In the theological discussions it became our goal to aggravate her to the point when she would hit us, just for fun. She had a mean right.

I had a housemate who wasn't much of a talker. Now that's an unfortunate personality trait in an institution that was preparing people to talk for a living. In one conversation with the quiet guy I can remember him getting agitated and uncomfortable with how long it was taking us to talk about some topic. When he couldn't take it anymore he blurted out: "Would you please just 'bottom line' this for me?"

'Just get to the point,' he meant—what's the one thing I need to know in order to move on.

In our text this morning we see the apostle Paul get to a similar moment. He's been making a case for several chapters now, but he's getting to the point—the bottom line.

*1It 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.*

*2Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. 3Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. 4You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. 6For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

'The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.' That's the bottom line. Hold that thought—we're going to come back to that.

We've been talking about the Atonement as a drama that happens in three acts: the Cross, the resurrection, and Pentecost—the gift of the Holy Spirit. On the Cross, a price is paid for the sin and brokenness in all of our lives. The

resurrection—the Easter miracle—demonstrates that God has power over all things, even death. And the gift of the Holy Spirit is God’s way of inspiring and empowering each of us to be the people he made us to be in the first place.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is something like the final ingredient in God’s plan for the church. He’s called it, redeemed it, demonstrated his power to give it confidence, and now he’s made good on his promise to come and make the community of faith into what it was meant to be—to complete the recipe for his church.

Last week our two youth preachers helped us understand who the Holy Spirit is. Through the summer we’re going to look at how the Spirit works in us and through us—where do we see the evidence for the work of the Spirit in our lives and in our church?

Earlier we heard the passage from this chapter about the fruit of the Spirit. Nine qualities or characteristics or behaviors that show how the Spirit transforms us into mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

Notice that ‘fruit’ is singular here—it’s like that in the original language, too. Now little details like that aren’t always helpful, but in this case it prevents us from picking and choosing from the list. All nine are the fruit of the Spirit. We can’t say ‘I’m loving and faithful, but don’t ask me to have any self-control.’ Or ‘I’m quite happy being gentle and good, as long as I don’t have to be patient with people who annoy me.’

This is a package deal, and that’s crucial for our understanding this summer of what the Spirit does in our lives. Over the next 10 weeks we’ll be looking at each of these qualities—these pieces of evidence that show the Spirit at work. But just because we’re looking at one each Sunday doesn’t mean that they stand alone. The fruit of the Spirit is expressed in all nine of these important ways.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians addresses a specific context, and it’s important for us to understand that context as we begin this study. Paul was writing to a community that was getting conflicting messages about how to make a commitment to Christ. There was a strong group within the church that believed you had to become a Jew first in order to become a Christian. They taught that you had to follow the rules and food restrictions of Judaism in order to join the Christian church. They end up being called Judaizers, because they required Judaism to be a part of Christianity.

Now the whole idea of circumcision as a metaphor can be pretty uncomfortable for us (no preacher really ever wants to talk about it) but it was a key part of the

process of following this path into a Jewish form of the Christian faith. In other words, when a new members class was being offered, the prize for finishing was the requirement that you get circumcised before becoming a member of the church. I wonder how many new members we'd get if that was the 'prize.'

Circumcision is an initiation into a specific way of believing and living. Now for a lot of us the idea of initiation conjures up images from movies like 'A Man Called Horse' or 'Animal House': Kevin Bacon saying "Thank you sir. May I have another." But it's a lot more than just that.

The other night I participated in a small part in the Court of Honor of the American School's Scout Troop. The process of moving through the ranks of Scouting, from Cub Scout to Eagle Scout—all of that begins with an initiation—an induction where you pledge to follow a certain path in a certain direction, and to follow it until completion. In part of that ceremony the Scout Leader says this:

*"The more you participate and the more effort you put in, the stronger your flame becomes and more difficult to extinguish. At some point, your flame will become a burning ember deep in your heart that will be impossible to ever put out."*

As Paul uses it, Circumcision is an initiation into a promise to follow a certain path—the path of trying to earn our way back to God strictly by following all of the rules of the Jewish Law. The promise made in circumcision is to follow the Law until completion.

One writer put it this way: Paul 'knows that circumcision symbolizes something very important—the identification of the Jewish people, the mark of those who live their lives under the jurisdiction of the *torah*...when a Gentile receives circumcision, he declares his own identity in terms of the *torah*,' of the entire Law of Judaism.

It's important for us to understand here that Paul isn't accusing the Judaizers of some horrible sin. He's warning them that by trusting the law for their redemption they're missing out of the limitless gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Paul's point, as you can see if you read the whole letter, is that Christ offers us a different path to God—that the Atonement heals our relationships in a new way, a way that begins not with Circumcision, but with *baptism*.

And it's in baptism that we experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in our lives individually and as a community of faith. That transforming power shows itself in us as fruit—as product—as visible evidence that something dramatic and

profound is happening in us. We see the Holy Spirit at work when we see lives that are defined by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Today our focus is on that 'bottom line' statement that Paul makes in our text about 'faith expressing itself through love.'

Victor Paul Furnish is one of the great scholars of Paul and his writings. He said this about our text:

"...for Paul, faith's obedience is an obedience in love, an obedience that has the character of love because it is grounded in God's own love by which the sinner has been claimed and reconciled to God. The Christian is summoned to love in a double sense: to be loved and to be loving. Within Paul's writings those two are inseparable."

*"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."*

That expression of love by way of faith is a two-way street.

First, we show our faith—and the work of the Spirit in our lives, when we live as people who are confident in God's love for us. When we live as people who are grateful for the way Christ's atoning work demonstrates just how fully and completely God loves us. Remember the sentence I gave us to memorize on Easter Sunday?

**We celebrate Easter to remember the miraculous raising from the dead of Jesus the Messiah—God in human form, who came and lived and served and loved and died in order to demonstrate the depth of God's love for all of his creation.**

Part of being a loving community—of being people whose faith is expressed through love—is living as if we believe that behind the Easter miracle there is a God who loves us and wants the best for us and who offers to shape us into the people we were meant to be.

Allowing ourselves to be loved is one of the most important ways we grow in our faith and our understanding of who God is.

But that love is meant to be turned outward, too.

'Faith expressing itself through love' is really the bottom line when it comes to how we live the Christian faith beyond these walls and beyond ourselves. If it's

true that we're a community who gathers not because of anything we've done, but because we've been loved by the God who made us, then that naturally turns us outward to a world that hasn't yet experienced that gift.

As we close this school year it's good for us to look back on the way this has happened here. The Soup Kitchen serves this community five days a week right outside these windows. We partnered with Young Life to reach out to kids in our community who didn't have a Christian group to enjoy. During the winter months we offered hot meals and a place to sleep to a group of homeless people with nowhere else to go.

But even within the church we're starting to see how important it is that we love each other. This has always been a welcoming kind of church, but our hospitality continues to grow as we welcome visitors and new expats and neighbors to our fellowship.

More significantly, we're gradually starting to heal some old wounds that keep us from being the church we're called to be. That process is ongoing, but it's happening, and it's a demonstration of the Holy Spirit in this place.

Even as we say goodbye today to some dear friends in this church, we don't see it as some tragic end to the way we want things. We see it as a transition—in a life that is full of them—for people as they go on to new homes and new communities and new opportunities to serve, and also for us as we wait and see who God brings here next.

We are called to demonstrate God's love to his world, and it's a joy to watch and to participate when it happens.

Over the next few months we're going to spend some time looking at the way the Holy Spirit works in and through each one of us. I want to say again that as we look at the different expressions of the Spirit's work individually, that we do that knowing that they're part of a package deal.

God doesn't love us *a la carte*—he doesn't pick and choose which parts of us meet his standard. Because he's a God of grace—of radical love and generosity—he loves us through and through, without exception and without limits. What he asks in return—not as a precondition but as a grateful response, is that we allow his Spirit to enter in and transform our lives.

As we move through this series over the next few months, remember that it all comes down to this bottom line: What really counts is our faith expressing itself in love to God, to each other, and to the world. Amen.

Let's remember the source of that love by standing and singing together "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."