

Galatians 6:1-16

For the Good of All

I would hazard to guess that you have been super angry at one point or another. Strong, maybe even harsh words were spoken. You just wanted to get your point across to someone you felt had it so wrong. Now I am not going to judge whether or not you were justified in your frustration and anger. I only want to get you to understand the tone of this letter written by Paul and shared with the churches of Galatia. Paul is pissed off, to put it right out there. He has heard that the churches in the area have been led down a garden path that for Paul only leads to perversion of the Good News of the Gospel.

You might imagine Paul pacing the floor as someone writes down what Paul is dictating to them. He is worked up because people have come along in the time that Paul has been away, after Paul established the churches, and have been telling them that they must be circumcised.

Now, that might not seem like a big thing to us, but for Paul it meant that someone was telling the people that in order to be the best kind of Jewish Christian you needed to do one more thing...you had to be circumcised, and Paul is like "NO! Did you not understand that Christ did for you all that was needed when he died on the cross and rose again?"

Once again, you might be thinking, "What is the big deal?" But for Paul it was all about people being led astray and into situations and understandings that could separate people from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He started out in the first chapter of Galatians with "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." (Gal 1:6-7) ¹

For Paul, who himself was a circumcised Jewish teacher, he profoundly understood that you didn't need to be circumcised to be a follower of Christ. That would just be one more regulation to fulfill and Paul was all about breaking barriers. Today circumcision is done for other purposes so it does not really play into this scenario for most males, this conversation is about a first century problem that speaks to other situations today.

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Actually, Paul would teach that Jesus was all about breaking barriers that came between people and between people and God. In chapter 3:28 Paul wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." This is also the part in this letter that talks about the fruit of the Spirit. This is one of the most recognizable scriptures in all of the Bible and Paul has written it after talking about all the ways we judge people to be acceptable or not acceptable. "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal 5:23) These lines follow what Paul has also written about the nature of Christian freedom, in which we are to become slaves to one another, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Gal 5:14).

Being a Christian is about responding to other's needs. In our scripture reading today you heard about bearing one another's burdens...helping each other out when we go astray or when we don't understand, responding to people in love and humility, because we too don't get it all right. We mess up, we have our own burdens to bear, but there are people who can help us carry our loads. That is what Christian community is about...responding to the needs we see around us, whether in and around this building or your home, your work place, your family circle or friend circle. Christian community is about responding to needs and that we do in community. It is why you being part of a church is so important. Yes, you can be a Christian and be a hermit, but truly we are called to love others, restore others to wholeness as community.

Trying to do this work on one's own would be exhausting. Besides it takes all the gifts of the Spirit to do the work we are called to do as Christians. Paul writes, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." (Gal 5:9-10)

To really get a grasp of all that Paul is saying you cannot look at only one part of this letter, the whole thing is together joined. Then you can see that this whole letter is about God's grace. This is a radical thought. A gracious God. Think about any ancient mythological god story of the Romans, Greeks and others, those gods demanded some sacrifice. For Christians, the sacrifice was made by God's self. There is a demand, that is to love God and love others. It is not about what we can do for God to earn our salvation or God's favour. We already have that. Any barrier we put up for ourselves or others in order to "fit in" or make us more fit for God is a farce and dangerous. When we put up walls, when we demand that people conform to the way we do it, whatever that may be, we need to ask ourselves why. Why do we think this is necessary? It has been as simple for some people as thinking that to come to church one had to dress a certain way. What difference does it make to God how you are dressed? God brought you into the world naked. You are acceptable to God just as you are. Dressing and covering parts of us is for the sake of others, it is about our concern for others, but it is not about how well dressed you are. It is the heart that matters.

And to go back to that word “grace”. Theologian Charles Cousar writes, “[Grace] describes the manner in which God gives himself, the personal relationship he establishes with his people. The word depicts the unmerited and unconditional way in which God has made and continues to make his move toward sinful humanity.”² The people Paul was writing to in Galatians were as Cousar says, “... working at the wrong end of the relationship with God – [they were thinking about] what *they* can do to assure inclusion in God’s family, what *they* can do to cope with power of the flesh; what *they* can do to fulfill the law” when “the answer lies at the other end – what *God* has done in Christ and how he has done it.”³

Grace is what God gives us and grace is what we then give to others. We do our best to not put up barriers for others and ourselves to God. It does not mean that there are no bad behaviours, or no best practices, but it has to do with faith and love. I cannot go into the depth of that in this message, but trusting God’s grace for us and others is a good start. Not demanding that people approach God, “our way” is helpful as long as what others are doing is grace filled, faithful, and loving. If people’s expectations cause harm to body, mind, and/or spirit, then those expectations are not of God.

God is grace. God is faithful. God is love. If we are image bearers of God then we too will strive to be people of grace, faith, and above all else...love. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (v13)

The purpose of all of this is to reshape us and the world into a new creation, one where all are free of the burdens that take away God’s promises of joy, hope, forgiveness and grace. Will we ever attain it? I don’t think that is possible until God’s kingdom is fully on earth, but we are called to be a part of bringing God’s grace to the world one moment at a time, one person at a time. We are called to transform the world, to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” (Gal 6:9-10)

One last comment, because of the part that says, “especially for those of the family of faith.” This is not meant to exclude others from grace, still taking care of the family of faith enables us to continue to work for grace in the world. It is in the church that we find our strength, that we lift one another up so that each day, each week, we can take that strength out into the world. We do not walk our faith alone. We do it in community to transform community. We do each through responding, restoring, and with rejoicing in the small and big ways we bring healing and hope, faith and grace. We do it because of love and for the love that comes from the heart of God.

² Cousar, Charles B. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching – Galatians*. Series Editor, James L. Mays. New Testament Editor Paul J. Achtemeier. John Knox Press. Louisville. 1982. P9.

³ Ibid.

We do it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.