

The Life that Counts

April 2, 2017

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(PIC) This is a picture of the children's home in Siliguri, India. It was our first stop in our two week trip; we stayed here about 4-5 days. As you can see from the picture, it's a fairly large home; I'm guessing it's about 5000-6000 SF (about 50 people eat, sleep and live here so it needs to be that big). It's 3 stories tall (we slept on the 3rd floor) and made entirely of concrete (which we were told the concrete for the entire building was hand mixed and poured... think about that.) You can't see it on the picture, but on the far upper corner of the building is the First Love sign. It includes the name, address, phone number... basic contact information. But in addition to these things is a verse; it's the guiding verse of First Love. It's the second half of Galatians 5:6, which is printed on the sign in the NIV and reads this way: *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

That's going to be our passage of study this morning. I want us to examine it for the sake of our own faith. I want us to think about that verse in relationship to the mission trips we took this month; the trip to Ukraine and the trip to India and Nepal. But maybe more importantly, I want us to think about the truth of this verse for the work God has called us to do in our communities. You know, mission trips are funny. You go far away to make an impact in the lives of people who you only spend a couple weeks with and, in many cases, you might never see them again. These trips are wonderful to do; we are pro short term mission trips here at FBC. When done well, they are fruitful. But what about here? What about in Taylor County? This is where we live. These neighbors, these coworkers, these classmates are the primary people God has called us to. We should be seeking the grace of God through prayer, the grace of God through his word, for a kind of faith that works itself out in love for those near to us more so than anyone else. Thankfully, we try to do that here. I'm so thankful that God has done good work in our lives to be missions-minded among our own. I'm hoping that our time in God's word this morning might remind us of the foundation of all these efforts and we also might be inspired to keep doing all that God has called us to locally, first, but globally as well.

There are three things about this passage I want to explore.

- First, I want to look at the faith part. Why must we have *faith* working through love? Why is faith a necessary part of this equation? In 1 Cor. 13 Paul says faith, hope and love all remain, but the greatest of these is love. If love is the greatest, why isn't that enough? Why doesn't he say, "the only thing that counts is love?" He doesn't say that. He says "The only thing that counts is *faith* working through love."
- Secondly, we're going to talk about the love part. Why must we get there; to love? Why doesn't he just say, "The only thing that counts is faith in Christ?" Aren't we saved by faith? Don't we receive the saving grace of God through faith alone? Yes, we receive God's saving grace through faith. So, why is love so important? Why must faith be seen through *love*?

- Finally, Paul says this is the only thing that *counts*. What does that mean? Counts for what? And don't other things count, too? Like God's word or evangelism or the church? Those are important. So, in what way is faith working through love the only thing that counts?

So, that's what we are going to look at today. I'm hoping you are catching on to this, but to understand one verse well you need to understand the context; let's briefly talk about that. Paul begins this letter to the churches of Galatia with some urgent concerns. Paul discovered that these churches were actually close to leaving God's family; they are actually just a few steps away from walking away from Jesus. But it's not because they were toying with Atheism or because new Buddhist teachers moved into the area and were converting them to Buddhism. It's clear from the passage that these church members aren't even aware they are abandoning Jesus (which should be a word of caution for all of us; it's possible to walk away from Jesus and not even know it).

What were they doing? How were they so close to walking away from Jesus? Paul tells us: they were misled into thinking that after they received Jesus by faith for their salvation, they were to continue their journey with God through rule-keeping. They learned they couldn't get into God's family on the treadmill of good works and obeying God's law, but once they got in by grace through faith, they were hopping back on that treadmill. And Paul can't believe it. Over and over again throughout this 6 chapter letter, Paul explains how the life with Christ is a life trusting and believing the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf from the beginning to the end; it's never a life trusting and hoping in one's own works. It's a life of joyful gratitude to God for what he has done for us, not a life of slavery on the hamster wheel trying to do enough for God. The Galatian letter was written to correct this misunderstanding. With that in mind, read with me Galatians 5:2-6 (READ).

You can hear the echoes of what I just said in these verses, right? The issue of circumcision is front and center. Now, that might seem strange to you and me, but for a Jewish person it makes perfect sense. God gave Abraham, the father of all of God's children, one command - circumcision. "Circumcise all your males as a sign of the covenant I have with you," God says. And any boy or man who is uncircumcised will be cut off from his people. Let me ask you: Was circumcision important? You bet it was. But Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all their children that followed them learned the painful lesson that keeping God's law is impossible. We can never obey well enough to please God. In fact, God never intended them to do it that way. He always was pleased with his people because of the faith they had and they expressed that faith through their obedience. Only through faith did the divine blessings come.

This helps understand why faith is so important to the formula Paul gave us in Galatians 5:6. The only thing that counts is *faith* working through love. Faith is the only thing that unlocks the supernatural power of God. Flip back with me to Galatians 3:2-5 (READ). Paul first starts with one's initial reception of the gospel in vs. 2. He asks, "Did you first receive the Spirit of God rescuing you from your sins through your efforts? Through your ability to keep the rules really

well? Or did you first receive the Spirit by hearing with faith?" We know the answer. Every person rescued from sins, every person a part of God's family and destined for life with God received this gift by hearing with faith. We received it as a free gift given to us by God with open arms where we sang, "Only because of God's grace!" Faith was the key that unlocked the supernatural faith of God.

But he doesn't stop with our initial reception; he moves onto our ongoing life. Look how he says it in vs. 3, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" meaning, is your ongoing life with God somehow now superpowered by something different? His answer is in vs. 5 (READ). God keeps doing his work among us and in us, not by works of the law, but by hearing with faith.

The life of God in us and through us always starts, progresses and ends with faith in God. It's a life of submission to his will; it's a life yielding to his kingdom; it's a life surrendered to God's way and word. It's never a life of earning good will or favor; life with God is not a meritocracy where God gives out based on one's demonstrated ability.

And do you know what that means? It means Christ is always lifted high as the fountain of love. We're going there next (the love part; the life of goodwill to others in the name of Jesus), but when we realize and know that the love that God commands only happens by a life of faith in Jesus as the exalted source of power and strength. The only reason I would go to Nepal, go to Ukraine, reach out to my neighbor, sacrifice for kids in Awana or in the nursery, work tirelessly behind the scenes here at FBC is because of my faith and trust in the name, the power, the cross, the word, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ births in us a life of love by faith. All Glory be to God!

But a life that counts isn't one just of faith; love must follow. Love is the actual fruit of a life of faith; it's where the rubber meets the road. Love is how Christians put their money where their mouth is. It's tangible and visible. This is one of the things that I so admire about our First Love friends in Nepal. Bob recounted again for us the Nepali Earthquake and how they ministered in some of the villages affected. They brought a little bit of everything. They brought food, water, clothing, building supplies for housing since so many lost their homes. They even brought a sewing machine (PIC) to a woman who lost hers in the rubble. And I loved what Bob said when he told us the story. He said, "We did it because we loved them. They were in need; they were hurting." So, at great cost and sacrifice to them, our First Love friends served and helped others - that's what love does. And guess what? When they came with the message that Jesus Christ came to save sinners, they listened. And many believed. So many that it shocked and surprised the workers of First Love. People came looking for them to receive Christ. Many in the village wanted to believe in the God who motivated our friends.

Our love for others in the name and power of Jesus authenticates our faith in Jesus. Our love for others says, "God is real. What he says is true. And I really believe in him and follow him." Do you remember the promise of the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36? In that marvelous OT

prophecy about the coming of God's new work by the Spirit, the new work that will save people by the all-sufficient grace of God, vs. 26-27 says, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and *cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*" When we are saved by God through our faith in Jesus, God's Spirit lives inside of us. The change that the Spirit produces in us is that he causes us to walk in the rules and commands of God. That's the tangible change God makes in those who believe in Jesus; we follow the laws of God.

Think with me: What's the fulfillment of God's law? What's the one command that covers all the commands? What's the one command that if you keep that one, you keep them all? Love. Love the Lord your God with all heart, soul, mind and strength. And to love one's neighbor as oneself. Can you see how this fits now? Love for others will automatically pour out of a person who has the Spirit of God living inside of them; it's the promise of the New Covenant. This is why Paul can say the only thing that counts is faith working through love. Because without love flowing from a person's life, the faith one says they have is called into question. How can you have New Covenant faith and not New Covenant love for others? They always go together.

One last thing about love before we move on to our final question. When you think of love, think tangibly. Don't think of good intentions and well-wishes. Think of real cost, real labor, real sacrifice and suffering. When you read the book of Exodus, for example, and you read the laws of God, they are very tangible and practical. If you start a fire that gets out of control and consumes your neighbor's field, pay your neighbor full restitution. Why? Because that's what love looks like. When you meet a foreigner in your land, don't do anything to harm or take advantage of him. Instead, take care of the foreigner. Why? Because that's what love does. Love isn't *thinking* restitution is a good idea and *intending* to help a foreigner, but not actually doing it. Love responds with action. The spirit of the age has conditioned us to think that love is a matter of our thoughts and emotions; God's word teaches us that love includes both our emotions and our actions. So, fight the prevailing mood, friends, with the truth of God's word.

Finally, Paul said that this kind of life - a life of faith working through love - is the only thing that counts. What does that mean? Counts for what? The answer to that question is found in the context of Galatians 5:2-6. The key word is found in vs. 4; it's the word "justified." The reason why people were adding to the gospel was to be found in good standing before God. You get the, right? Imagine: You're going to a job interview. It's for the job you've always wanted. And your close friend is the assistant to the person conducting the interview. And your friend says, "Make sure you try and get on his good side. He loves kitties so put your resume on stationary with kittens all over it. And he uses Kit Kats as breath mints so offer him a breath mint and when says, 'Sure,' hand him a Kit Kat. And he loves polyester so go down to the thrift store and see if you can find an old leisure suit. That's how you'll get good standing."

The Galatian churches were told, "If you want to get on God's good side, if you want to have standing before him, if you want to be justified, make sure you keep the right rules, the right way at the right time." And that makes Paul want to puke. Because there's only one person who can justify us before God and it's Jesus Christ. There's only one work that can earn our standing before the Judge of all the Earth and it's the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. When he died on that cross, he did everything necessary for every person to ever have good standing before God. To say you need to do something else to be justified before God is like saying what Jesus did wasn't enough; it's the most offensive thing Paul could hear.

That's why he says, "The only thing that counts is faith working through love." There's only one thing that will earn our standing before God and it's faith in the one who died for us and was raised, faith in Jesus, and faith proven to be authentic by the love that only God can produce when he's alive in our lives.

There's something very God-glorifying about this life. To care so deeply to live the life - the only life - that's gets justified by God is way of saying, "Nothing is more important than you, God! Nothing is of higher value! Nothing is a greater consequence! The only thing that matters is living a life that is justified before the God of the universe because there is no greater treasure than knowing you." This means, my good FBC friends, that you passionately loving others in the name of Jesus, which flows from your unwavering faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ for you is a primary way you proclaim the infinite worth of Jesus Christ giving all praise and glory to him. That, friends, is an excellent way to live.

Key vs. Gal. 5:6

Questions for the week

- Which part do you need God's help with the most, the love or faith part? Why?
- How does the promised New Covenant inspire or encourage you?
- How did God convict, challenge or encourage you today from his Word?