

Gospel Freedom Gal 5:1-15

Tim Anderson 4/8/2019

The French writer Antoine de Saint Exupery wrote,

"The one thing that matters is the effort".

What he meant was that it's not the achieving of your goals that counts it's the hard work you put in to achieve them.

Well not all of us are as philosophical as the Frenchman.

And he would have to be a Frenchman

with a name like Antoine de Saint Exupery, wouldn't he?

But other people would say,

the one thing that matters is your health.

You can make do with limited money,

but you can't buy your health.

Still others would say the one thing that matters is family.

Friends come and go.

Family is always there.

In our Bible reading today,

Paul has a one thing that matters quote for us.

5:6 "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

The only thing that counts.

That's a big claim.

The Mormon self help guru Stephen Covey said,

"The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

But this is more than the main thing.

This is the only thing.

Footy coaches are infamous for rallying the troops,

"Winning isn't everything. It is the only thing."

But Paul says,

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

And unlike a footy coach,

Paul is not speaking in hyperbole.

He means,

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

What does he mean?

As we've been saying in previous weeks,
The Galatian Christians had come under pressure to add good works
to their faith in Jesus.
In particular to add complying with the OT Law to their faith in Jesus.
There were some false teachers
who in today's reading Paul calls agitators.
What's an agitator?
Well it's the thing in the middle of a top loading washing machine.
It gets the clothes all stirred up so they get clean.
Well these agitators were getting the church in Corinth all stirred up.
According to Acts 15:1, their message was,
"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses,
you cannot be saved."
And Paul has been at pains to explain to the Galatians,
"No, you are only saved by faith.
Putting yourself under the Law makes you a slave.
So 5:1
"Stand firm then,
and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."
How could they be burdened by a yoke of slavery?
If they allow a teaching that says you need good works to be saved.
As soon as you say,
"God will save those who are good people."
That's an intolerable burden for anyone to bear.
How can you possibly know that you are good enough?
Demanding good works for salvation turns us into slaves.
Slaves with no sense of security.
We never know if we are good enough.
But God wants us to be children.
Children who feel totally secure.
Children who know they are loved irrespective of their performance.
And so God saves those who put their trust in him,
in the way a small child has unconditional trust in their parent.

That's pretty much where we have come from in Galatians so far.

But it raises a question.
It's a question for all of us.
But the first people to ask it are the hard working and conscientious.
Do we have any hard working and conscientious people
here this morning?
If you are one of those who thought,
yes that's me,
but were too modest to call it out,
then I'm guessing this is your question.
"If I'm saved by faith,
and good works don't contribute to my salvation,
then how should I live my life,
can I live any way I feel like?"
And there's often a sense of outrage that comes with that question.
It doesn't seem right at all.
And in fact it's been a question
for as long as salvation by faith has been preached.
In Romans 3, Paul says that he's been falsely accused of saying
that you can live however you like because salvation is by faith.
But that's never what Christians have taught.
So if we are saved by faith,
how should we live?
The key verse is verse 6.
"The only thing that counts
is faith expressing itself through love."
Faith expressing itself through love.
If you wanted one phrase to encapsulate
what living for Jesus is all about,
you could do a lot worse than 'faith expressing itself through love'.

We need the faith part.
You can't just have love.
You can find lots of do gooders down at your local service club.
Well intentioned folk no doubt.
Rotary's motto is 'service above self'.

That's a laudable motto.
But where does the motivation to serve come from?
Sometimes it comes from a desire to look good before others.
Jesus says, 'Truly I tell you,
they have received their reward in full.'
Sometimes it comes because,
"Life has been good to me,
so now it's time to give something back."
Which is fine until life stops being good to you.
But then what do you do?

To really be able to serve, rail, hail or shine.
you need an inexhaustible supply of love.
And faith is what gives you that.
5:5 "For through the Spirit,
we eagerly await by faith,
the righteousness for which we hope."
The Holy Spirit lives in our hearts.
He gives us the power to wait
for our complete transformation
to become the people God made us to be.
And we know that future is secure.
Don't be misled by the word 'hope'.
In the Bible, hope is a sure and certain conviction
about what God is going to do in the future.
We use the word hope to convey doubt.
'I hope that I will get some grandchildren one day.'
Well you'd have to say that there's a decent chance.
But there are no guarantees.
But the Bible uses the word hope
to tell us about things we can be totally sure of
because of God's promises.
So 5:5 "For through the Spirit,
we eagerly await by faith,
the righteousness for which we hope."

We trust in God's promises which are totally sure,
and that promise is to make us pure and perfect in his sight.
And that is the inexhaustible supply of love,
that enables us to serve rain, hail or shine.
No one can take God's promise away from you.
Here's a fantastic Tim Keller quote,
"The more joy we have in our gracious salvation,
the more we are driven by love and gratitude
to do good for the sheer beauty of good,
for sheer delight in God,
for the sheer love of others."

Sometimes Christian people find that they are finding it hard to love.
Some people can be really annoying, you know.
They can be just plain hard to love.
What do we do when we face that problem?
The temptation is to think to yourself,
"I must try harder to be loving."
As if the Holy Spirit gives us the initial urge to love,
but when the Holy Spirit runs out of energy,
we've got to do the rest under our own steam -
by putting in more effort.
The Holy Spirit doesn't run out of energy.
So if you are finding it hard to love,
you need to focus on faith.
Think about Jesus and how much he loves you.
Think about how Jesus was willing to give up his life for you.
Think about how Jesus loved you even when you had no time for him.
When you've spent some time on your faith,
then you will find that love comes naturally again.

Another question that we struggle with today is,
'What is love?'
Australia society and indeed Western societies over the whole world
have got ourselves into a great deal of confusion about what love is.

At the same sex marriage plebiscite,
we had the very enlightening slogan,
that love is love.

Well I guess a baked bean is a baked bean,
but that really doesn't tell you what a baked bean is.

Typically in our culture,
love is reduced to a feeling.

Sometimes it's even reduced to sexual attraction.

Consistently in the New Testament,
love is measured by Jesus' death on the cross.

That's a very different standard of measurement
to feelings or sexual attraction.

Jesus death tells us that love is first and foremost
about putting the other person first
being willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of the other person.

And while in the right context feelings and sexual attraction
may well be an expression of love,

they certainly are not front and centre in Paul's mind
while he's writing this letter.

Faith expresses itself through the love of sacrificial service.

Keeping the church focused on faith expressing itself through love
is no easy task.

And in the final paragraph of our reading,
Paul has a few things to say about the false teachers
who have managed to knock the Galatians off course.

5:7 "You were running a good race.

Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?"

Paul often compares the Christian life to running a race.

He's talking about long distance,
not sprinting.

The Christian life is about charting a steady course in following Jesus,
and not being knocked off course by false teaching or ungodly living.

But sometimes when you are running a race,
someone else cuts just in front of you

and really disrupts your stride.
Sometimes they even trip you over.
And that was what Paul saw happening to the Galatians
by the false teachers who wanted to bring them under the Jewish Law.
Paul says 5:8 "That kind of persuasion
does not come from the one who calls you."
Who called them?
God called them to be his children.
It's obvious, right?
False teaching does not come from God.
But when it comes from someone
who is a recognised leader in the church,
it's sometimes difficult to recognise
that what you are hearing is not from God.
And there is a responsibility on congregations
to weigh what you hear from guys like me.
We should not be simply taken on trust.
False teaching was a problem in the church in Galatia.
It's also a problem in the church in Melbourne.
And it's been a problem in the church in every age, in every place.
When you read over church history,
sometimes it strikes you as remarkable
what monstrous lies people swallowed.
No doubt those things seemed plausible at the time,
and it's only with the benefit of distance
that we can see easily how false the teachings were.

Maybe false teaching is only a problem at the margins?
Maybe it's only amongst Jehovah's Witnesses and Unitarians
that we need to worry?
No. Sadly not.
5:9 "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."
Paul is saying that it only takes a small amount of false teaching
to work its way through the church.
And it will end up affecting the whole church.

So whose responsibility is it to keep false teaching out of the church?
I mean clearly it's a big problem.
This is not some minor matter.
Paul tells the Galatians
that this issue is breaking their relationship with Christ.
5:4 "You who are trying to be justified by the law
have been alienated from Christ;
you have fallen away from grace."
So whose job is it to make sure false teaching
doesn't come into our church?
Well it's a shared job.
Paul is writing to the Galatian church.
He clearly thinks that the members of the church have a role to play.
It's not just a question for leaders.

One of the reasons that I preach systematically through the Bible -
week by week we have been going through Galatians,
chapter by chapter,
is to make it easy for you to do your job.
You need to hold me accountable for teaching
what is found in God's Word.
If I were to jump all over the place,
how would you know if I were skipping some parts that I don't like?
Or worse still,
if I were preaching stuff that I said was Christian teaching,
but I didn't reference the Bible at all,
how would you know if I were leading you up the garden path?
So congregations have a role
in keeping false teaching out of the church.

But of course the teachers themselves are accountable.
James in his letter
says that teachers will be judged more strictly than others.
Here, Paul says, 5:10
"The one who is throwing you into confusion,

whoever that may be,
will have to pay the penalty."
That penalty is not a fine and off you go.
Paul is talking about facing the wrath of God.
This is what he tells the church in Corinth
about God's response to those who destroy his church. 1Cor 3:17
"If anyone destroys God's temple,
God will destroy that person;
for God's temple is sacred,
and you together are that temple."
God takes damaging his church very, very seriously.

Lots of people are scandalised by what Paul says
about the false teachers.
5:12 "As for those agitators,
I wish that they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves."
Our English translations have done a pretty good job
at obscuring what Paul means here.
Nothing like using a word nobody knows the means of
to keep things unclear.
I mean who uses a word like emasculate
except someone trying to show off their impressive vocabulary?
Paul simply means,
"Those false teachers want you to be circumcised,
cutting off the foreskin.
Don't bother with that.
Let them chop their whole thing off!"
That's a pretty in your face comment from a Christian leader.
But we should take it from that
not that Paul is an over excitable chap prone to outbursts
but that Paul knows how very serious false teaching in the church is
and he desperately wants the Galatians to realise how serious it is also.
And he wants us to realise that too.

Well our passage finishes with another call to live out the faith in love.

5:13-14 "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: love your neighbour as yourself."

Often within the Christian community, we find people who are very committed to truth, they might be able to spot a false doctrine at one hundred paces, but they find it very difficult to humbly serve in love. Or on the other hand, we find people very committed to a sentimental idea of love, but they can't see the tremendous damage that is done by false teaching. They think a commitment to truth is all about getting over excited about trivia.

But in today's passage, Paul wants us to value both.

Verse 7 tells us the importance of obeying the truth.

And we've seen that Paul sees stern judgement for those who teach error.

But we've also seen that Paul thinks the essence of the Christian life is faith expressing itself through love.

And that love is about humble service.

As Christians we are committed to truth and love.

If you are a person who finds yourself leaning in the truth direction, ask yourself,

"Do I actually show love to those I think are a bit wobbly when it comes to the truth?"

It's very easy for truth lovers to fail to love that piece of truth about loving your neighbour.

If you are a person who finds yourself leaning in the love direction, ask yourself,

"Do I actually respect those who have a deep concern for God's truth?"

It's very easy for those committed to love to despise rather than respect those with a strong commitment to truth.