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Galatians 5:2-12

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Back in 1998, just after we were married, Veronica and I travelled to Montreal for her interview with the US immigration folks. While we were there, we took a day to drive to Ottawa to do some sight-seeing. It was March and still very much winter in Montreal and as we left the island, driving over the bridge on the Trans-Canada Highway where the Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers converge, we were surprised to see a Jeep speeding across the frozen river, going in the opposite direction back towards Montreal, driving on the ice. Having lived my whole life on the West Coast I'd never seen anything like that myself. I have no idea about the history of bridges to and from Montreal Island, but I would guess that at one point riding a horse or driving a wagon across the frozen river was the usual way to get across during Winter. But then Spring would come, the ice would melt, and all that would change. I expect there were ferries that carried people across the rest of the year, until the river froze again.

Now, for Paul writing to the Galatians, Jesus is like that spring thaw. Ever since they'd left Egypt, the identity of the people of God had been tied up in their observance of the law. Circumcision was the beginning of it—eight days after a boy was born. That marked him out as one of God's people, as a member of God's covenant and an heir of his promises. But through life, that identity was lived out by keeping the law: by celebrating the Passover every year, by keeping the Sabbath, by offering sacrifices at the temple, by eating only clean foods and by avoiding unclean things *and people*. The law was the

way to righteousness, the way to fellowship with God. But that was like driving across the river on the ice. It was all right and good—and in the case of *torah* it was God-given—but it was for a time. Things changed. Jesus changed them. Jesus changed everything. In Jesus Spring has sprung. God's new creation has begun. The old world is starting to thaw. Think of the wonderful image that Lewis used in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, with Narnia frozen by the witch—always winter, but never Christmas. But when Aslan arrived, the whole country began to thaw and the new life of Spring began break through the snow and the ice. Jesus has changed everything and in Jesus' new world, the law no longer counts—it'll no longer get you across the river, because the river's thawed. Try to get across with the law now and you'll just be caught up in the current and lost downstream. In Galatians 5:2 Paul puts it this way:

Look here: I, Paul, am telling you that if you get circumcised, the Messiah will be of no use to you.

So over the last four chapters Paul has made his argument to the Galatians and, we saw last week, he's finished it with the command to cast out the false teachers—to cast them out the way Sarah cast out Hagar and Ishmael—because there's only one family that has inherited God's promises. Cast them out. They're undermining the gospel. Don't let their heresy fester; cast them out. But I expect Paul knew they would need more to persuade them to do that, so now he turns back to the circumcision issue. Actually, this is the first time that he mentions circumcision outright in the letter. So he sort of pulls himself up to his full height and says, "Look here! I, Paul—you know, the apostle who met Jesus personally and who told you the good news about Jesus in the first place—I want to be very clear that if you follow the advice of these circumcision folks, if you get circumcised, Jesus the Messiah will be of no use to you."

Those are some powerful words. These pagan gentiles had been completely captivated by the good news about Jesus: this man in whom God became incarnate, who died for the sake of his people, who rose from death and then ascended to his throne. They were captivated by the good news about this Lord who was unlike any lord or god they'd ever known. And they believed, they'd been baptised, and God had plunged them into his Spirit and they'd been transformed. They knew the power of the gospel. They knew the power of Jesus and the Spirit. And Paul's saying, "If you get circumcised, *all of that is gone*."

The good news here is that if Paul's putting this way, it means the Galatian believers haven't yet caved into the pressure from the circumcision agitators. Reading between the lines, it sounds like the agitators have split up the church with the ethnic Jews—the circumcised—on the inside, while the gentile believers are being forced to sort of participate or to watch from the sidelines—just as things were in the temple in Jerusalem with Jews in the inner court making their offerings and sacrifices at the altar while the gentiles were stuck in the outer court imagining what was going on inside. Maybe the agitators had got them eating kosher and observing the Jewish calendar, but none of the gentiles had actually gone all the way to circumcision yet. And Paul's trying to get to them, to persuade them before they do. Because if they do, it's like driving your car onto that thin, melting ice. Jesus has made a better way. So he goes on in verse 3:

I testify once more, against every person who gets circumcised, that he is thereby under obligation to perform the entire law.

Paul reminds them what it really means to be under the law. Even the agitators seem to have forgotten that. They wanted these gentile believers to do just enough so that they could pass

for Jews with the authorities: get circumcised, stop buying pork in the market, observe the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days. They were motivated by fear. These new gentile believers were abandoning the gods and the religious customs of the Greeks and Romans and to avoid getting into trouble they were claiming the Jewish exemption—except they weren't Jews—and if the authorities caught on, it might bring persecution on the whole Jewish community. So the agitators wanted these gentile believers to take on some of the obvious Jewish externals. And Paul reminds them of what they should have known already: that's not how the law works. The law is all or nothing. They've accused Paul of only teaching part of the gospel and now Paul turns around and accuses them of teaching only part of the law. If the gentile believers go the way of circumcision, they'll end up neither genuine Messiah people nor genuine *torah*-observing Jews.

Back in 2:15-21 Paul said that “through the law [I] died to the law” and that “if righteousness is through the law, the Messiah died to no purpose.” Now in verse 4 he says the same thing another way:

You are split off from the Messiah, you people who want to be justified by the law. You have dropped out of grace.

To look for justification—which means to show you're a member of God's covenant people—to look for that through *torah*, is to reject the grace of the gospel. He's been stressing that God's covenant people are now those marked out by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. That faith in Jesus—and *nothing else*—is what marks us out as God's people. The moment you add to that—whether *torah* or anything else—you lose the gospel and when you lose the gospel you lose God's grace. In this case, if circumcision is what marks out God's people, then

there was no reason for the Messiah to die and to take that old mark in your flesh as a means of justifying your place in the covenant is to reject Jesus and the gospel.

But why? Well, Paul explains in verses 5 and 6:

For we are waiting eagerly, by the Spirit and by faith, for the hope of righteousness. For in the Messiah, Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any power. What matters is faith, working through love.

Do you remember last week when I was closing and talked about how seriously Paul took false gospels? We tend to dither around and make excuses when it comes to false teaching. We often struggle to know where to draw the line. It's not always easy to tell where the line is—where something that's just poor teaching crosses into bona fide heresy. In contrast, Paul was really clear: Cast them out. Get rid of them. Don't let the false teachers influence the church. And the way to tell when something crossed the line was to ask if this teaching was still pointing forward into the age to come or if it was something that would drag us back into the old evil age. Paul gets at that again here when he says that we're waiting eagerly, by the Spirit and by faith, for the hope of righteousness. In other words, true Christians will always be looking forward in hope to the day when God will vindicate our faith in Jesus, that day when he will finally judge sin and evil and wipe it all from his creation, when death will be no more, when everything will finally be set to rights, and we—his people through faith in Jesus—will live in his presence forever. Does our theology, does our practise honour the saving work of Jesus and the Spirit and does it look forward to the day when the work of Jesus and the Spirit will finally be fulfilled—or—is our theology or our practise dragging us back into the old age, into the things

that once held us captive—whether the law for Jews or the powers of this evil age for the gentiles. In this case, in terms of practical outworking, does our theology and practise bring us together as one people in Jesus, or does it separate us. Again, think of the temple with Jews on the inside and gentiles on the out—and how these circumcision folks were trying to impose that kind of template on the Galatian churches all over again.

In contrast, in Jesus it no longer matters whether you're circumcised or not. That was part of the old covenant, the old way, but the ice has melted and that old way won't get you anywhere anymore. No, someday, before the watching eyes of the whole world, God will call us his own and it won't be because of any marks we bear in our flesh or because of anything we've done, it will be because we have been baptised into, because by faith we have put on the Messiah as our identity and because God has poured his Spirit into us. Jesus and the Spirit are the ticket that will give us passage on the ferry across the river. What matters, he says, is faith working through love. Faith is the only way to get the ticket—and here Paul hints at what he'll have to say later in the chapter—faith is more than just a thinking thing; it's more than just giving our intellectual assent to the propositions of the creed. Faith means trust. Faith means loyalty. Faith means allegiance. Faith means committing ourselves to God's new creation made manifest in the risen Jesus and the gift of the Spirit—a new creation made possible by love—and so faith, true, real faith in God's love and that returns God's love and that manifests God's love to the world, that kind of faith is what matters. That kind of faith is what marks out the people of God and that kind of faith is what will see us through—through hardships and opposition and persecution and maybe even martyrdom—that is the faith that will bring us through to the day when all

God's promises will finally be fulfilled.

And Paul thought they knew all this, which is why he's so shocked and frustrated with them. It's why he wants to know how they could have gone so wrong so quickly. See how he continues in verse 7:

You were running so well. Who cut in on you and stopped you being persuaded by the truth? This persuasion didn't come from the one who called you.

When Paul left them they were well on their way, running for the prize—running into God's new creation—but now they've gone off course. "Who's cut in on you?" Paul asks. It's not the normal word we might expect him to use for someone interrupting the runners, slowing them down or setting them on the wrong course, but Paul is making a harsh accusation here and so he tempers it with some wordplay. They want to be circumcised, they want to be cut in their flesh. That was never part of the plan for this race, so he asks, "You who want to be cut, who's *cut* in on you?" They were set on the truth of the gospel, but these other folks showed up and have cut in on all that with a false gospel. He reminds them that it was God who called them to this in the beginning—through the good news about Jesus—but this new persuasion, this new "truth" they're going after, that came from somewhere else—not from God. They're playing a dangerous game and Paul reminds them of an old Jewish proverb in verse 9:

A little yeast works its way through the whole lump.

I think what he's trying to say is that once you start going astray from the gospel, it's not long before you've lost the gospel entirely. We see this a lot down through church history. Add something to Jesus as a marker of covenant membership and pretty soon you've lost the whole gospel. Paul

might also be warning them that once you start listening to one false teacher, pretty soon you start listening to anyone. That happens a lot too. And so Paul exhorts them:

I am persuaded in the Lord that you won't differ from me on this. But the one who is troubling you will bear the blame, whoever he may be.

They were originally persuaded by God to pursue the truth of the gospel, but these other folks have persuaded them to pursue something else, so Paul stresses that the Lord has persuaded him. Persuaded him of what? That, in the end, they'll come back to the gospel truth. He says literally "you will think nothing else". When Paul says that he is "persuaded in the Lord"—something he doesn't say often—it means that he's been praying about something and that the Lord has given him a clear conviction. It would be dangerous for us talk this way, but Paul was in that unique position of having the authority of an apostle. The point seems to be that the Lord has revealed to Paul that the Galatians will come back to the truth, but that it will be Paul's Spirit-inspired words that will be the means of bringing them back.

By the same token, this false teacher who has been trying to lead them astray will "bear the blame". Paul might be referring to the way that the Galatians will cast him out—as he told them to do at the end of Chapter 4 or it might even be more serious than that. He might be talking about God's judgement and condemnation of this false teacher. Paul just calls him "whoever he may be" and I don't think that's because Paul didn't know who this man was. The church in those first decades was small and everyone knew everyone. Whoever it was, Paul's point is that they can't dither on this false teaching. They can't treat it as something of secondary importance. There are lots of things on which Christians can differ. Someone's wrong and

someone's right, but there are some issues on which we can disagree while still holding tightly to the truth of the gospel. This was not one of those things. This was one of those things on which the gospel stands or falls and Paul wants them to know—it's a bit of a threat—that this false teacher *will* without a doubt be held accountable—and the quiet part he doesn't say out loud is that anyone who goes along with him will also go down with him. He's headed out onto thin ice with his car and anyone who goes along for the ride will end up at the bottom of the river with him. Brothers and Sisters, false teaching is no joke.

Then verse 11. Paul seems to be addressing an accusation against him.

As for me, my dear brothers [and sisters], if I am still announcing circumcision, why are people still persecuting me? If I were, the scandal of the cross would have been neutralised.

It sounds like these agitators, knowing Paul's history as a Pharisee, back in the days before Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, it sounds like they've been telling the Galatians that Paul was still preaching circumcision—just not to them. Saying that Paul's a hypocrite. And so Paul appeals to his own suffering and persecution. They knew what had happened to him. It sounds like when he first showed up in Galatia, he was beaten and bloody and weak because of persecution in some nearby town or city. Paul appeals to that. This is a strand that runs all through Galatians that I'd never noticed until I started this series of sermons, but it's there. For Paul, suffering for the sake of the gospel was often proof of its truth. It goes back to the cross. Jesus' crucifixion set the pattern so that to follow him wasn't just a new way to be religious—as so many people treat it today: it's good for me, but if you don't like it that's okay too. The gospel isn't just another option on the religious smorgasbord. For Paul, the

good news about Jesus is the truth that had already begun to change the world. It is the truth that Jesus has already overthrown the powers and kings of the present age and inaugurated the age to come. And, in light of that, Paul didn't see the churches as little religious clubs, but as a network of communities where people, filled with God's own Spirit, were living out God's new creation in the midst of the old, declaring that Jesus is Lord right under the nose of Caesar, who made that claim for himself—for example. Living as one people in the midst of ferocious ethnic and religious divides. Living as a people of grace and mercy in the midst of a dog-eat-dog world. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, this made the gospel a scandal and a stumbling block. Even this early in his career as an apostle and mission Paul can say it. His calling is to proclaim the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen and the world's true Lord. The Spirit works in the hearts of those who hear that good news. In some the Spirit uses that message to bring about faith, hope, and love, but for others the scandal of the crucified God causes them to cast stones at the messenger who dares announce this anti-religious, anti-social, and unpatriotic message. If all Paul had been announcing was that pagans could get circumcised and join the Jews in their synagogues in order to become exempt from pagan worship, why no one would have been persecuting him.

No, if Paul had been doing that, the scandal of the cross would have been neutralised—something I think every generation finds its own way of doing as we trim the culturally offensive bits of the gospel. And so Paul says, closing off the paragraph in verse 12:

I wish those who are making trouble for you would cut the whole lot off.

Paul comes back to his wordplay with circumcision and cutting off. Don't stop at circumcision, just cut the whole thing off. Of course, under

torah, that sort of mutilation would have cut them off from covenant. But, too, the goddess Cybele was popular in Galatia and it wasn't uncommon for her devotees to work themselves up in a manic ritual that ended with them castrating themselves. I suspect Paul has that in mind, because as he's said, whether it was the Jews under the law or the gentiles under their pagan powers, humanity before Jesus was enslaved and to undermine the cross through circumcision, going back to the law, well, these gentiles might as well just go back to their old pagan gods and their old pagan worship. Either way, they'll end up "cut off" from God and from his people.

That's as far as we'll go this week. As much as the Galatian problem may seem distant and irrelevant to us, since circumcision and keeping the Jewish law aren't likely to be our problem, what I hope you can see is the underlying issue. There are things in every age that we do, by which we undercut the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Galatians were motivated by fear of persecution—and that's often the driver. We're afraid, whether it's that we might lose our lives or just offend friends or family, for the sake of the gospel and so we compromise, we water things down, we shave the sharp corners off the message where it confronts our culture and the powers of our day. We end up with a false gospel powerless to save and we run the risk ourselves of losing our way—of running off the race course, of trying to cross the river on the melting spring ice...and putting ourselves in a position where we have forsaken God's grace and made the Messiah of no use to us. Paul reminds us here that suffering, that persecution for the sake of gospel truth is part of the formula, because we trust in and follow and proclaim the crucified and risen Messiah—a stumbling block to Jews and a scandal to gentiles. Brothers and Sisters, take hold of that gospel truth and run—run the course that leads straight to God's new age,

straight to his new creation and let no one cut in on you, take no short cut. There is only one way. It begins with trusting Jesus and the Spirit, but it also means continuing to trust Jesus and the Spirit along the way, trusting that God will bring us through suffering—just as he did Jesus—to that day when we ourselves will be raised from death and everything is made new.

Let's pray: O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*