



October 2021

Church 2021

Part 2

**Readings, Reflections
and Prayers**

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Monday, October 4: Galatians 1:1-9

Some churches have unspoken (or spoken) rules – about how to dress, how to act, what you must believe about this, that, and everything else. Rather than being communities of joy, hope, peace, and love, they can be VERY judgmental, narrow, and legalistic. If you don't become "just like them" you are not welcome. In fact, you are probably not a Christian. Have you ever experienced that? Is that biblical?

Galatians is written by Paul to Christians in Galatia, not far from Ephesus. Paul emphasizes we are saved by God's grace, not by following rules. He also highlights that ALL people who believe in Jesus are one in Christ. God is building a new Kingdom – one, unified Kingdom of all who believe in Him – regardless of age, ethnicity, language, gender, or heritage. Everyone who has faith in Jesus is part of one big (hopefully happy) family.

Some Jews were sure the Messiah was just coming to save them and only them. If non-Jews could even become Christians, surely they had to keep all the Old Testament laws including circumcision. Last month, we read how the early church dealt with this in the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). The council concluded it was not necessary to follow the laws of Moses; that ideal, which no one could live up to, was finished. Faith in Jesus is key. All the Council commanded was, *"You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality"* (Acts 15:29). In other words, stay away from other gods, practice healthy dietary habits (for the time), and maintain high sexual standards (important in an age of culturally acceptable anything-goes sexuality).

Some Jewish Christians, who argued that you-had-to-be-Jewish-to-be-Christian, were still not accepting salvation by faith alone. They were teaching you really DID have to become Jewish (and follow all the Jewish laws) to be a Christian. You were NOT saved by faith in Jesus. You were really saved by following the Old Testament rules.

Paul is having none of this. He emphasizes that he, Paul is *"sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead"* (1:1). He is not alone in this: *"all the brothers and sisters (are) with me"* in this (1:2), referring to the consensus of the Council. The "gospel" (literally "good news") that these become-a-Jew teachers were teaching was not good news at all. Their insistence on rules put you back under the "bad news" ball-and-chain-legalism of Old Testament law. You were back to being "saved" by slaving away to keep the law perfectly. But because no one can ever do that, no one really has any hope.

Paul wants us to know that we are saved by **faith in Jesus** – and only by **faith in Jesus**. We don't earn our salvation by **doing things** like following religious rules. This may seem counter intuitive. We like to think good people deserve good things: of course we earn favour with people – and God – by doing what's correct. That "feels" right. But God loves us unconditionally. He loves us as we are. He knows we can never be good enough. He saves us as we accept His gifts of love and mercy. We don't earn our salvation. Why is that hard to accept?

Yes, we ought to do good deeds, but these flow **from** our new life in Jesus.

Writing about contemporary culture, Carey Nieuwhof comments, *"Every time there is a change in history, there's potential to gain and potential to lose. I believe the potential to gain is greater than the potential to lose. Why? As despairing or as cynical as some might be (sometimes understandably) over the church's future, we have to remind ourselves that the church was Jesus' idea, not ours. It will survive our missteps and whatever cultural trends happen around us. We certainly don't always get things right, but Christ has an incredible history of pulling together Christians in every generation to share his love for a broken world. As a result, the reports of the church's death are greatly exaggerated."* That's good news.

What additional things – besides faith in Jesus – can churches/Christians add to faith alone as "rules" for salvation? Why? How can we stay true to the Bible's teaching that we are saved by faith and faith alone?

How can we be ONE body as Jesus' people, even though we are so diverse? How can I reach out to others who have faith in Jesus but may express their faith differently from me? How can we be "church" in 2021?

*Lord, take full possession of my heart.
 Raise there your throne and command from there as you do in heaven.
 Being created by you,
 let me live for you.
 Being created for you,
 let me always act for your glory.
 Being redeemed by you,
 let me give to you what is yours and let my spirit cling to you alone.
 May I have the courage, confidence, inspiration, and power
 to share what you have done for me and in me.
 In the name of Jesus, who overcomes all powers of this world,
 Amen.*

John Wesley (1707-1788)

Tuesday, October 5: Galatians 1:10-24

Nieuwhof goes on, *"Many individual congregations and some entire denominations won't make it. The difference will be between those who cling to the mission and those who cling to the model. When the car was invented, it quickly took over from the horse and buggy. Horse and buggy manufacturers were relegated to boutique status and many went under, but human transportation actually exploded. Suddenly average people could travel at a level they never could before. The mission is travel. The model is a buggy, or car, or motorcycle, or jet. Look at the changes in the publishing, music and even photography industry in the last few years.*

"See a trend? The mission is reading. It's music. It's photography. The model always shifts ... moving from things like 8 tracks, cassettes and CDs to MP3s and now streaming audio and video. Companies that show innovation around the mission (Apple, Samsung) will always beat companies that remain devoted to the method (Kodak). Churches need to stay focused on the mission (leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus) and be exceptionally innovative in our model."

The "other" teachers – those who insisted people had to be Jewish to be Christian – doggedly held to the old ways: you earned favour with God by following rules. Believing the right things. Doing the right things. They accused Paul of simply wanting to be popular. After all, if you let non-Jewish men off without being circumcised, more might become Christians – horrors! That would not be "fair" to Jewish men who had been circumcised.

Paul points out if he simply wanted to be liked, he wouldn't be teaching about Jesus at all. He talks about how popular he was – before Jesus: he was on the fast track to Jewish super-stardom. But then God got hold of him (read the full story in Acts 9). God saved Paul, by His **grace** (Galatians 1:15). God then commissioned him to share the same **grace** to non-Jewish (Gentile) and Jewish people. Paul goes on to talk about the time he spent with Peter and the other Christians leaders in Jerusalem. He refers, again, to the Council in Acts 15, where Peter said, *"We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they (non-Jews) are"* (Acts 15:11). We are saved by God's grace. It's not about rules. That model is finished.

For Paul, the important thing now is his mission – to tell people about Jesus. As a church our mission is: *"We love Jesus: we want to make Him know locally and globally through Word and deed."* If that's our mission, then the models we use to get there may change a bit over time ... The message (God's grace) is timeless.

Do we ever get hung up on the model rather than the mission? Is the "music-I-like" more important than loving people searching for Jesus? Does a dress-code/behaviour-code trump our hospitality? Do we have a doctrinal check list about correct understandings of end times/prophecy/ethics/___ (fill in the blank)? If you "fail" on any of these things, you must not be a Christian. Are those genuine "tests" of faith in Jesus?

Can we welcome people with messy lives to church? Without judgment? With love and mercy?

We are saved by faith. But we are saved **to show and share God's unconditional love**. Paul begins simply by telling his story. No one can argue with what he experienced. We can tell our story, too. **You** have a unique story. How did you come to faith in Jesus? Or have you always had faith in Jesus? How has Jesus made a difference in your life? How is He making a difference in your life today? Don't be afraid to tell your story.

People can argue theology and philosophy, but no one can argue what God has done in your life.

*The Church is full of people in the Autumn of their years.
Some have led colourful lives,
leaves bronzed and golden through exposure to the elements.
Others have been exposed to more extreme conditions,
branches bowed and scarred.
Some go unnoticed,
yet stand tall and steadfast against wind and rain.
All have a story to tell.
All can offer support and shelter for saplings which grow beneath their leafy canopy.
Lord, help us be your people.
One in heart. One in love. One in Spirit.
Amen*

John Birch

Wednesday, October 6: Galatians 2:1-10

Carey Nieuwhof goes on, *"Read the comments on any church leader blog and you would think that some Christians believe the best thing to do is to give up on Christian gatherings of any kind. This is naive. While some will leave, it does not change the fact that the church has always gathered because the church is inherently communal. Additionally, what we can do gathered together far surpasses what we can do alone. Which is why there will always be an organized church of some form. So while our gatherings might shift and look different than they do today, Christians will always gather together to do more than we ever could on our own."*

People have been predicting the demise of the church for centuries. It isn't happening. But it does challenge us to think about important questions: What is the church? Who is the church? What are the essentials of church? Who is a Christian? Who isn't? How do you know? Can you tell by the clothes they wear? Whether or not they go to church? Their politics? What they believe about a (not-so-critical) doctrine? No ...

For some people in Paul's world, answering these questions was easy. If you were a godly/Christian (man), you would also be (or become) a Jew: therefore (as a man) you would be circumcised and follow all the Jewish Law. After all, it had been so in the Jewish world since the days of Abraham (in the male-centric world of first century Judaism, women don't figure into these debates). Wouldn't it be great to have such an easy diagnostic tool?

Paul, however, is having none of this "you're-saved-because-you're-circumcised-and-therefore-Jewish" nonsense. He makes the point, over and over, that we are saved by **faith in Jesus**. God does not love one nationality more than another. In the Kingdom of God – in the family of God – there are no divisions based on nationhood, race, genetics, gender, age, or politics. We are one in our faith in and love for Jesus.

Today (I hope) we understand that. Our own congregation is multicultural. But do allow other divisions to get between us? Do we question the real Christian identity of people in other Christian traditions? Do we judge who is "in" and who is "out" based on doctrine? (what criteria do we use? Are they biblical?). Do we evaluate people based on their political loyalty? Perspectives on vaccines? In practice, do we believe people are saved by faith and faith alone in the grace of God? Or do we add other hoops? Do we add additional criteria?

What one command came out of the Council in Jerusalem? *"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along"* (2:10). "The poor" may have referred to

churches who were persecuted and in need: who are the “poor” churches today – those most persecuted and in need? How about churches in the Middle East? It definitely also referred to poor people – locally and globally – Christian or not: one of the greatest witnesses of the early church was its care for the poor of ALL religious, ethnic, tribal, social, and spiritual backgrounds. Like God, they loved ALL people. How about us?

As we begin to think about Thanksgiving and Christmas, consider supporting CBM mission projects in Lebanon, Cuba, Kenya and other countries that seek to care for refugees, the poor, the sick and suffering, and those who are persecuted for their faith (visit [Hopeful Gifts for Change](#) online or pick up a *Hopeful Gifts for Change* booklet at the church). Support local projects that care for the poor, too.

*God, our true life, to know you is life,
to serve you is perfect freedom,
to enjoy you is the kingdom,
to praise you is the joy and happiness of the soul.
I praise and bless and adore you.
I worship you, I glorify you.
I give thanks to you for your great glory.
I humbly beg you to live with me, to reign in me,
to make this heart of mine a holy temple,
a fit habitation for your divine majesty.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Thursday, October 7: Galatians 2:11-21

(Note: Peter and Cephas are one and the same person – “Peter” is Greek for “rock.” “Cephas” is Aramaic for “rock”). The words “Peter” and “Cephas” are nicknames for the man really named Simon. All very confusing.

Carey Nieuwhof comments, *“Consumer Christianity asks ‘What can I get from God? It asks, What’s in it for me?’ That leads us to evaluate our church, our faith, our experience and each other according to our preferences and whims. In many respects, even many critics of the church who have left have done so under the pull of consumer Christianity because ‘nothing’ meets their needs. All of this is antithetical to the Gospel, which calls us to die to ourselves – to lose ourselves for the sake of Christ. As the church reforms and repents, a more authentic, more selfless church will emerge. Sure, we will still have to make decisions about music, gathering times and even some distinctions about what we believe, but the tone will be different. When you’re no longer focused on yourself and your viewpoint, a new tone emerges.”* This is Paul’s concern in the 1st century.

These verses give an interesting insight into Peter’s character we haven’t seen before. On the one hand, Peter has been the champion of salvation by faith: *“We believe,”* Peter had said, *“that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus”* (Acts 15:11). On the other hand, in the incident to which Paul refers here, Peter seems to give in to peer pressure, sliding back into dogma that people must follow the old Jewish law to be saved. Perhaps Paul deliberately calls Peter by the Aramaic (the common Jewish language at the time) “Cephas” in this passage – after all, Peter is reverting to the old, pre-Jesus, Jewish way of doing things.

Paul goes on: *“We know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law”* (2:16).

He continues: *“When I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law – I stopped trying to meet all its requirements – so that I might live for God. My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”* (2:19-20). The Jewish system didn’t work. Following rules perfectly (if it were possible) could not save anyone. But through faith in Jesus, we are saved. We have new life – real life.

“So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not

treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die" (2:20-21). If the old Jewish order of things could save you, why did Jesus bother to come? Why did He die? There was no need for Him to make the amazing sacrifice He made.

God's invitation is to discover that when **Christ lives in me**, I really, truly begin to live for the first time. C.S. Lewis writes, *"The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become – because He made us. He invented us. He invented all the different people that you and I were intended to be ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own."*

How can I turn over more and more of my life to Jesus? How can our church be more selfless and more committed to reaching out in His love? How can I be more selfless? How can I reach out in love?

*We desire, Lord, that you will add to all our other gifts, the gift of faith,
by which we shall trust in you.
Faith that works by love.
Faith that stays with us.
Faith that transforms material things and gives them spiritual meaning.
Faith that lights up the world with a light that never sets.
Faith that shines brighter than the day.
Faith that completely clears the dark night out of our experience.
We humbly ask you to grant us faith that gives us victory over the world and over ourselves.
Faith that makes us courageous in all temptation and makes us conquerors,
more than conquerors through Him who loves us.
Amen.*

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)

Friday, October 8: Galatians 3:1-14

As we approach Thanksgiving, what are you thankful for? Are those things all your own accomplishments? Or do you count yourself blessed by God? Has God graciously provided for you, time and time again?

Paul wants to make sure the Galatians really get it. All they have in life is the gracious gift of God. There is no longer any smug ethnic superiority that comes with being Jewish. Through Jesus, God has saved the whole world. Through Jesus, God has created one Kingdom, one church, one family of ALL people. Through Jesus, we are ALL saved, if we put our faith in Him. We are not saved by our ethnicity. We are not saved by following rules, rituals, or practices. As we shall see, there are things we do and do not do **because** we are saved – but these are results of our salvation; they are not preconditions to it.

"This way of faith is very different from the way of law ... But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing ... Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith" (3:12-14).

Paul does want us to get the truth that we are "one in Christ" as His people. We are His family. We accept, love, and care for one another as family, one with another. Whatever our ethnic heritage, age, gender, ability, income, genetics ... we are one in Christ. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all equally precious to God.

One of the realities of family life is that when one member of the family hurts, everyone hurts. When we hear of tragedies like the kidnapping of Christian students in Nigeria, we should take it personally. When Palestinian Christians are killed, we ignore it. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ. I find it disturbing that the North American church seems to see Palestinian, Middle Eastern, Asian, and African **Christians** as "second-class citizens" in the Kingdom of God: we just don't really care when these things happen.

If these events happened at a (white) synagogue in Israel, North American Christians would be up in arms. Outrage would be all over social media. But few people seem to care if they happen to African, Asian, or Palestinian Christians. Are we more racist than we realize? Really, we should be upset when these events happen to **anyone** – regardless of race or religion.

The Christian churches in Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and India are among the oldest churches in the world: they were founded by apostles like Paul, Peter, James, Mark, Philip, and others. These Christian communities are our spiritual ancestors. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They have been brutally terrorized in recent years. The Syrian conflict has now resulted in the most refugees in modern history. Our brothers and sisters around the world are modelling a much deeper discipleship than simply "going to church." They are literally putting their lives on the line for Jesus. Would I do that?

Pray for ALL of the Middle East and North Africa – Christian, Jewish, Moslem – everyone. Pray especially for our brothers and sisters in Christ, their witness, and martyrdom.

North American Christianity has been (rightly) accused of becoming consumerized: we choose a church based on what the church can do for **me**, not for what I can do **for God**. But fewer and fewer religious consumers are going to church to get their spiritual "fix." *"The death of consumer Christianity will change our gatherings,"* comments Nieuwhof. *"Our gatherings will become less about us and more about Jesus and the world he loves. Rather than a gathering of the already-convinced, the churches that remain will be decidedly outsider-focused. And word will be supplemented with deeds. In the future church, being right will be less important than doing right. Sure, that involves social justice and meeting physical needs, but it also involves treating people with kindness, compassion in everyday life and attending to their spiritual well-being. This is the kind of outward focus that drove the rapid expansion of the first century church."*

May the Lord help us not be consumers of church ... but to be people who live our faith in Word and deed.

*Send forth your light and your truth,
that we may always live near you, our God.
Let us feel your love,
that we may be, as it were, already in heaven.
May we do our work as the angels do theirs.
Let us be ready for every work, ready to go out or in,
to stay or to depart, just as you direct.
Lord, let us have no will of our own,
or consider our true happiness as depending in the smallest degree
on anything that happens to us outwardly.
Let us know that true life consists totally in conformity to your will.
Amen.*

Henry Martyn (1781-1812)

Saturday, October 9: Galatians 3:15-29

This is the church according to Paul: *"You are ALL children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you"* (3:26-29). The church is people – people united by their faith in Jesus. The church is men and women – spanning all ages, ethnicities, abilities. The church is God's chosen people, heirs of the promise God made to Abraham centuries ago. It's NOT ethnic. It's NOT earned. It **IS** about Jesus. It **IS** about grace and faith.

God's promise to Abraham was *"I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt."*

All the families on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). Abraham was blessed to be a blessing. He was to be God's good news to the world. Unfortunately, that mission was lost through the centuries and Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, became disobedient, self-absorbed, and corrupt.

Jesus re-establishes God's call to His people to be a blessing to others. His church is the new people of Israel, called to bring His love and good news to the world. We are called to fulfill Abraham's mission.

Church is not a passive thing. It is active. Corrie Mitchell writes, *"Christians are the church – we don't go to church. Sure, we gather on Sundays for teaching and singing and fellowship. But that's a small part of what it means to be part of the church. Church isn't something you can compartmentalize to one hour spent one day of the week in one location. It's life as the body of Christ. Which means that it's a lot greater of a commitment than we often allow it to be. If you let it – and you should – "church" invades your whole life, as it did for the early Christians."*

"Currently, many churches try to get people to attend, hoping it drives engagement," says Carey Nieuwhof. "In the future, that will flip. The engaged will attend, in large measure because only the engaged will remain. If you really think about this ... engagement driving attendance is exactly what has fueled the church at its best moments throughout history. It's an exciting shift."

As we celebrate Thanksgiving this weekend, think about the things you are most thankful for ... The things you care the most about ... Those are the things you have invested a lot of time, energy, and resources into (family? friends?). And those will be the things you will continue to invest time, energy, and resources into ...

How important is Jesus to you? How important are the people around you to you? God's invitation is to count our blessings – family, friends, and faith – and choose to make them top priorities today and everyday. God's invitation is to get engaged in His mission – to be a blessing to others – practically, how can I do that?

*Lord Jesus, I believe that you're able and willing to deliver me
from all the care, unrest, and bondage in my life.
I believe you did die to set me free, not only in the future, but now and here.
I believe you are stronger than sin, and that you can keep me, even me,
in my extreme of weakness, from falling in its snares.
Lord, I'm going to trust you to keep me.
I have tried keeping myself, and I failed, and failed most grievously.
So now I will trust you.
I give myself to you.
I keep back no reserves.
Body, soul, and spirit, I present myself to you as a piece of clay,
to be fashioned into anything your love and your wisdom shall choose.
I am yours.
I believe you do accept that which I present to you.
I believe that this poor, weak, foolish heart has been taken possession of by you.
Even at this very moment, you have begun to work in me to will and to do your good pleasure.
I trust you utterly, and I trust you now.
Amen.*

Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911)

Thanksgiving Sunday, October 10: Ephesians 2:11-22

It's easy to like people just like us. Anyone can do that (Luke 6:27-36). The challenge for us, as followers of Jesus, is to love people who are not like us: people from different ethnic backgrounds, of different social status, with different abilities, with different political views ... This sounds easy. It's not always easy to put into practice.

"I have always been intrigued when people express a desire to be more like the New Testament Church. It causes me to wonder which of the messy and imperfect early churches they want to emulate. All of them were living, breathing human communities not unlike the ones we attend. So what is about those churches that people desire? More importantly, do they know what they are asking for? The greatest secret of the Christian faith is the community of the local church. At its best there is nothing like it on the face of the earth ..." writes Gary Nelson.

As a church, as a community of faith, God calls us to be many things. Our calling includes welcoming everyone. Of course, if people come **to** the church, I HOPE we welcome them. But God pushes us **OUT** – to be welcoming in our relationships outside the church as well. Most people who will come to faith in Jesus will do so because they are invited, through genuine friendships with people like us, not by walking 'cold turkey' into a church building. Our challenge, then, is to share His love with **everyone** we meet. Do I have relationships with people who are not-yet Christians? People with different ethnic backgrounds? People who are different than I am?

How am I doing at seeing all people as created uniquely by God, with inestimable value? Do I see some people as "less valuable? (perhaps people who are Muslim? First Nations? With addictions? Different politics?)

This Thanksgiving we will probably have visitors at church. Please go out of your way to make them feel **VERY** welcome. It is so easy to only speak with our friends. Please make a little extra effort to speak to someone you don't know – especially if they seem all alone – today. How can I be as loving as Jesus?

*How shall I repay your generosity, my Saviour?
How shall I repay you, my God, for all you have given me?
How shall I thank you, my Lord,
my Comforter, my Intercessor, my Liberator, my Redeemer?
How shall I thank you, who did not spare yourself,
that I, a poor wretch, should be filled with joy?
For my sake you gave yourself up to dishonor, insult, mockery, infamy,
to be spat upon, condemned, whipped, wounded, crucified, and put to death.
How shall I repay you?
I have nothing I can call my own.
My soul and body – my nature – is from you and belongs to you.
You, and You alone, have saved me.
I shall offer you a grateful heart,
and that alone is what you desire of me.
But even this I cannot do without you and your Spirit.
Your Spirit makes it possible for me to give my heart to you ...
and so I give myself to you, completely, without reserve.
Amen*

Tychon of Zadonsk (1724-1783)

Monday, October 11: Ephesians 3:1-13

The church is God's plan for sharing His love and salvation with the world. After Jesus' ascension into heaven, the church – we – are called to be His body: representing Him, acting on His behalf, behaving as He would behave if He were here. How are we doing at that? Is that how the non-church world sees us? Why? Why not?

"God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord"(3:10-11). That's challenging.

Ephesus is an interesting place to be the church. Ephesus is home to the world-famous Temple of Artemis (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). Tourism to the temple was big business. Souvenirs – miniature statues of Artemis and the temple – provided a good income to local craftspeople. It is in Ephesus that church

leaders were mobbed in a riot (Acts 19:23-41). The riot was incited by business owners fighting to protect their livelihoods. This chaos – in days before police forces – was a potentially lethal event in which the early Christians could easily have been lynched (which was probably exactly what Demetrius and his cronies wanted). Despite the opposition, the church continues to be a dynamic community that impacts the city in the name of Jesus (Acts 19:1-22). In this very difficult, multi-faith, multi-ethnic, hostile city, God's people live their faith in such a way that the church grows. Isn't that awesome?

Paul knows that living our faith may not be easy. It's often inconvenient. It can even be dangerous. But that is the path we are called to walk.

We don't live our faith in isolation. We live our faith in community with others – church. We can think of the church as a mission outpost. As our city becomes more multi-ethnic and multi-faith, we are on a mission. We gather as a church to encourage one another, build one another up, help one another, learn from one another, pray for one another, worship our Lord with one another, care for one another ... and then move out into our everyday lives wiser, supported, encouraged, and equipped to be Jesus' followers. We live our faith in the world. We share God's love in our world.

The history of First Baptist, Lethbridge, is of people with a strong sense of mission – to the city, to new immigrants, to the world beyond us. Our challenge is to keep kindling the fire of that missionary zeal and to continue to live as God's ambassadors of His love and good news to our city ...

Today, give thanks for God's blessings in your life. Pray for those you know who are struggling. And ask God to help you see how you can make a difference in someone's life today ...

*Lord my God, the amazing horrors of darkness were gathered around me and covered me all over.
I saw no way to carry on.
I felt the misery of my fellow creatures separated from the divine harmony,
and it was heavier than I could bear, and I was crushed under it.
I lifted my hand and stretched out my arm, but there was none to help me.
I looked round about and was amazed.
In the depth of misery, Lord, I remembered that you are all-powerful,
that I had called you Father, and that I loved you.
So I was made quiet in your will, and I waited for deliverance from you.
You had compassion on me when no man could help me.
I saw that humility under suffering was shown to us in the most perfect example of your Son.
You taught me to follow him, and I said, "Father, your will be done."
Amen.*

John Woolman, in the early stages of smallpox (1720-1772)

Tuesday, October 12: Galatians 4

To a ragtag band of early followers of Jesus, Paul says, "*now there is no Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (3:28). **ALL** of us who believe are free through faith in Jesus. Even more than that, God brings us **ALL** into His family as His children. "*Because you are his sons (and daughters), God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'*" So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir" (Galatians 4:6-7). We are **ALL** princes and princesses, children and heirs of the King, in the Kingdom of God.

So, if we who believe are **ALL** God's children through faith, why would we listen to teachers who try to convince us we are still slaves groveling to earn God's favour? Those who were emphasizing the importance of the Jewish law are doing just that. They are presenting God as a vindictive tyrant, out to find any teensy-weensy fault with us and – if at all possible – blast us into eternal punishment. Some recent Christian teachers try the same hellfire and brimstone strategy to terrify people into faith in God: if you disobey any of their "Thou shalt nots ..." God is

only too sadistically pleased to send you directly to hell. Or if you differ from them on some (minor) point of theology, you are not a "true" believer and you're doomed to destruction.

Is this what God is really like? In Galatians 4, Paul draws on Jewish history to help his readers understand they are free through Jesus. Writing to the Romans, Paul makes the same point more clearly: *"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"* (Romans 5:6-11).

This is the good news of grace Paul wants us to know and understand.

"For years, the assumption has been that the more a church grew, the more activity it would offer," notes Nieuwhof. "The challenge, of course, is that church can easily end up burning people out. In some cases, people end up with no life except church life. Some churches offer so many programs for families that families don't even have a chance to be families. The church at its best has always equipped people to live out their faith in the world. But you have to be in the world to influence the world. Churches that focus their energies on the few things the church can uniquely do best will emerge as the most effective churches moving forward. Simplified churches will complement people's witness, not compete with people's witness."

Paul wants us to be good news. We are "Royals" – God's royal family. The "best" Royals (the members of the Royal Family we respect the most) invest their lives making a difference for those in need: victims of violence, the sick, the poor, those who cannot speak up for themselves ... As God's royal priests/children, how do we live that out? How can we be the King's children, living with love, grace, mercy, and hope?

Nelson Mandela wrote that, *"To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."* Our challenge is to live as God's sons and daughters in such a way that the world is a better place because we are here. How can we make a difference for those in need?

*Lord, we pray that your Spirit would grow its fruit of your Spirit in us.
In the midst of market-style exchanges, grow our love.
In the midst of manufactured desire, grow our joy.
In the midst of fragmentation, grow our peace.
In the midst of productivity, grow our patience.
In the midst of self-sufficiency, grow our kindness.
In the midst of self-help, grow our goodness.
In the midst of impermanence, grow our faithfulness.
In the midst of aggression, grow our gentleness.
In the midst of addiction, grow our self-control.
Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.
Lord, help us to trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we sow seeds of faith, and not fear.
Lord, walk ahead of us and help us to follow you.
Walk beside us and hold us up in difficult times.
Walk behind us and protect us.
Amen*

Wednesday, October 13: Galatians 5:1-15

Paul writes, *"So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law"* (Galatians 5:1). None of us are in danger of that, are we? We don't believe in circumcision

and all that Old Testament rule stuff.

And yet we do, sometimes, create our own rules and regulations: to be a Christian you have to do (or not do) certain things, follow (or not follow) certain rules, defend (or not defend) certain cultural values, believe (or not believe) certain doctrines, be friends (or not be friends) with certain types of people ... I have some folks who constantly send me emails with links to websites, videos, and blogs to "correct" my theology and opinions on all sorts of things from end times, to science, to vaccines, to you-name-it. We can slip into new legalisms.

Sometimes we create our own little rituals and superstitions: we have to pray in just such a way at just such a time – or else; we have to read so much of the Bible at a specific time – or else; we have to do this or that in worship – or else ... If we do things differently – try a new model – we're doomed.

And, sometimes, we bargain with God. *"God, if you help me get through this, I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life/read my Bible every day/give a monthly donation to ____ ..."* We think that God will be impressed by our resolutions – which (like the Old Testament Law) we just cannot keep.

"We who live by the Spirit," Paul says, *"eagerly wait to receive **by faith** the righteousness God has promised to us. For when we place our **faith** in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is **faith** expressing itself in love"* (5:5-6). It is about faith – not works.

"You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters," Paul emphasizes (5:13). But as Nelson Mandela said, freedom is not a gift we are to use for our own self-indulgence. It is a gift we have been given so we can love others and make a difference in the world. Just as a few of the Royal Family have caught a vision that their blessings of influence and wealth can be used to improve the lives of others and the environment, the freedom we have in Jesus is a gift we can use to bless others: *"Don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom **to serve one another in love**. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"* (5:13-14).

Martin Luther King Jr. challenges us *"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."* None of us is likely to stand in front of tens of thousands and give a speech like King's *"I have a dream."* But each of us does have opportunities to make a difference in the lives of people around us ...

"Faith," Martin Luther King Jr. also said, *"is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."* We may not see a staircase of things we can do that will change the world ... but we can find one small step of love that will improve one person's life ...

*Grant me, Lord, to know what I ought to know,
to love what I ought to love,
to praise what delights you most,
to value what is precious in your sight,
to heed what is offensive to you.
Do not allow me to judge according to the sight of my eyes.
Do not let me pass sentence according to the lies spread by other men.
Help me always to inquire what is the good pleasure of your will.
Lord Jesus, because your way is narrow and despised by the world,
grant that I may despise the world and imitate you.
For the servant is not greater than his Lord, nor the disciple above the Master.
Let your servant be trained in your life,
for there is my salvation and true holiness.
Amen.*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Thursday, October 14: Galatians 5:16-26

On one hand, human history is a sordid tale of violence, greed, selfishness, brutality, intolerance, hatred, bigotry, and war ... On the other hand, human history is an inspiring story of sacrificial love, honour, care for others, peacemaking, mercy, compassion, generosity, nobility, equality, and goodness. Think about any era in history and you can recognize this tension between good and evil being played out, again and again.

This same battle between good and evil is fought within our own souls. Paul says, *"Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions ..."* (5:16-17). How do you find that to be true in your life?

Paul goes on: *"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God"* (5:19-21). Paul bluntly says these things are not morally neutral: they are from the Dark Side. They are evil. So, being "in Christ" does not mean go crazy and indulge your passions. Just because you are "free" and something "feels" good, doesn't mean all things are good for you.

In contrast, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* (5:22-25).

In the battle between good and evil in your life, don't give in to the Dark Side. Fight the good fight to follow the Spirit's leading in every part of your life. When you fail, confess it. Get up. And keep fighting on ...

Ultimately this is not a battle of equally matched forces: God has already decisively won the war when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. The power of the Spirit, the power of the resurrection – within us – is greater than any power in the world. Even though we have tough battles along the way, be confident.

How would our **church/family/community** be transformed if we were more loving? More joyful? More peace-full? More patient? More kind? More good? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled?

Pray through the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). How can **you** become more loving? More joyful? More peace-full? More patient? More kind? More good? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled?

*Dear Father, grower of spiritual fruit,
Let the fruit of the Spirit blossom, mature, and ripen in my life:
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
Since I belong to Christ,
I have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
Let me live by the Spirit.
Let me walk by the Spirit!
Let me show no self-conceit, give no provocation,
have no envy toward anyone else.
Let me live in, through, and for Christ Jesus,
as he lives in, through, and for me and his whole church.
In the name of Jesus, I ask you to perfect us, whatever that may take,
and give us the grace to endure your renovation process.
Amen.*

Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies

Friday, October 15: Galatians 6:1-10

"The word 'blessed' has been utterly abused," says Corrie Mitchell. "People constantly humble-brag by appending a tweet or status with #blessed. People are blessed with game wins, amazing boyfriends, and perfect milk-to-cereal ratios (yes, I just saw each of those on Twitter.) We've simultaneously twisted the word's true meaning and devalued it. Look at the most popular use of 'blessed' in the Bible – the Beatitudes. Who does Jesus say is blessed? The gist is this: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake ... you get the picture. So, not me for a treadmill opening up right when I get to the gym? Hmm. While it's right to praise God for his provision, the popular thinking around being 'blessed' treads dangerously close to the prosperity gospel. True blessing is the joy of belonging to God, who (in Jesus) rescues from sin and death – which is as true on a vacation in Maui as in a hospital bed."

Yesterday we read, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (5:22-23). Paul uses an agricultural metaphor (fruit). Now he continues the farming imagery: *"You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone – especially to those in the family of faith"* (6:7-10).

Paul gives some practical examples (6:1-6) of what that might look like.

Paul writes, *"Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* (5:25). Paul is emphasizing – in a positive way – that we are saved by God's grace and we are empowered by God's grace; therefore, we should live by God's grace. We don't do good things so God will like us. We do good things because God's Holy Spirit is at work in us. God's Spirit working in and through us, inspiring us, guiding us, and empowering us is responsible for anything good we do. It is all about God. Not us. God's "good works" in me and through me are **God's** good works, not mine.

"The Holy Spirit illuminates the minds of people, makes us yearn for God, and takes spiritual truth and makes it understandable to us" writes Billy Graham – He is the One who deserves all the credit, not us.

Expressing this negatively, Corrie Ten Boom writes, *"Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you."* J.I. Packer explains it this way: *"The Christian's life in all its aspects – intellectual and ethical, devotional and relational, upsurging in worship and outgoing in witness – is supernatural; only the Spirit can initiate and sustain it. So apart from him, not only will there be no lively believers and no lively congregations, there will be no believers and no congregations at all."*

If we try to explain everything, accomplish everything, and be everything on our own, we will only be a shadow of who we can be when we allow the Spirit freedom to move in our lives. Try walking with the Spirit today. Ask Him to lead you. Ask Him to open your eyes to see possibilities. Ask Him to guide your conversations. Ask Him to see how you can help His Kingdom come and His will be done today ... Ask Him to see how you are truly blessed ... and how you can be a blessing to someone else today.

*Through every minute of this day, be with me, Lord.
Through every day of all this week, be with me, Lord.
Through every week of all this year, be with me, Lord.
So shall the days and weeks and years be threaded on a golden cord.
And all draw on under you Spirit's will into your fullness, Lord,
that so when time is past, by grace, my work here on earth will be done
and I may, at last, be with you, Lord. Amen.*

John Oxenham (1852-1941)

Saturday, October 16: Galatians 6:11-18

What is the most important thing in your life? Why?

This is how Paul answers that question: *"As for me, may I never boast about anything except **the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died. It doesn't matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation"* (6:14-15).

For Paul, his relationship with Jesus is the important thing in His life. Nothing else comes close. First and foremost, his identity is as "follower of Jesus." His occupation (as a tentmaker) is way down the list of ways in which he defines himself. His education (a doctorate in Jewish theology) is irrelevant. His dress/appearance? He never talks about them. His bank account/portfolio/assets? Never mentioned. What Paul really wants us to know is that his life only finds meaning, purpose, and identity as a person whom God loves, for whom Jesus died, and in whom the Spirit lives ... And as someone who wants to follow Jesus, ever moment.

How do you define yourself? In terms of your job? Your education? What you wear? What you own? Who you vote for? Does any of that really matter? Does any of it make you uniquely you? Millions of other people have a similar job, education, clothing, party-loyalty, car, and other stuff ...

But God loves **you**. He died for **you**. His Spirit fills **you**. **You** are His precious child – a prince or princess in the Kingdom of God. That is who you really are. God wants you to know this, not so that you become arrogant, self-centered, or spoiled ... but so that you live with integrity. It is from this strong sense of self-identity, as God's child, that you can be who He created you to be: His ambassador of grace and love to others.

When we know who we are (God's beloved children), we can share His love with those around us. God wants us to know His love so His love can then overflow through us and be a blessing to others. Paradoxically, the more we appreciate God's love **for us**, the more love we have to share **with others** (conversely, the less secure we are about God's love for us, the more self-absorbed and less loving toward others we may be).

Know that God loves you, right here, right now. Then, may the Lord help us to love Him and love our neighbours in simple – and profound – ways ... What might that look like for me, today?

*Thank you, O God, that I arose from my bed today,
That you have given me life, the fullness of life itself.
May I live my life to your glory, O God,
the one who has given me every gift.
May my soul always desire to give you glory in all things.
Lord, even as I clothe my body with these garments,
I pray that your love and mercy would wrap around me
and cover my soul with the shadow of your wings.
Help me to avoid every sin.
Save me from every temptation.
And as the rising sun melts the mist upon the hills,
melt the darkness in my soul so that I may serve you, and you alone, this day.
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

Sunday, October 17: Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul's prayer is a prayer of encouragement. He has just talked about how he has had a difficult time living his faith. Suddenly he pauses to pray encouragement for others. He prays for you. What a blessing.

We all appreciate a good dose of encouragement now and then. Isn't it amazing how much a sincere "encouraging word" means to us? Isn't it amazing how others value our encouragement? If encouragement is so important, why do we not give it more? Why are our words of encouragement few and far between? (After all, in Lethbridge we literally do live in "*a home, where the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play; where seldom is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day.*" I would like to change the lyrics to "**often** is heard an encouraging word ..." What do you think?)

Why not become an encourager? Every day, think and pray about one person you could encourage – for anything (as long as it's genuine) – AND DO IT. Our culture loves to find fault with us, cut us down, and devalue us. But genuine encouragers can make such a difference. Encouragers build the Kingdom of God.

Today at church – or by phone, email, text, Skype, Zoom, or prayer – say a sincere encouraging word (or many!).

*Lord, I fall to my knees and pray to you, my loving heavenly Father,
You are the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth.
I pray that from your glorious, unlimited resources you will empower us with inner strength through his Spirit.
I pray that Christ will make his home in our hearts as we trust in him.
I pray our roots will grow down into God's love and keep us strong.
I pray we may have the power to understand, as all God's people should,
how wide, how long, how high, and how deep your love is.
May we experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully.
May we be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.
Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us,
to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.
Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever!
Amen*

Ephesians 3:14-21

Monday, October 18: 1 Peter 2:1-17

We just endured TWO elections. How do you feel about that? I've been stressed by all the polarization ...

To keep things in perspective, let's remember who we ARE. We ARE all God's chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession, people saved by Jesus, "*temporary residents and foreigners*" in this land. Our primary identity is as God's people, citizens of the Kingdom of God. As such we are called to love and serve our community and country as God's people. Being God's chosen people and being His priests are **active** terms – He wants us to be His hands and feet on the ground, making a tangible difference in the lives of people and His creation. However we voted, we cannot abdicate responsibility to make Canada a better place to politicians – we must take that on as our personal and corporate mission (as the church), today and every day.

Second, let's remember who we ARE NOT. We are NOT first and foremost Conservatives, Liberals, NDP-ers or anything else. We are not even first and foremost Canadians. Our primary identity is as GOD's children, GOD's priests, and citizens of GOD's Kingdom. No party is "God's party" (sorry). Don't let your politics consume you. And don't let political allegiances divide us. In an eternal perspective, they just don't matter.

As a church – as the people of God, His priests, His children – we are called to share His love His love in Word and deed. We care for the poor and lonely, practice genuine justice, seek peace, model unconditional love and forgiveness, steward God's creation, and protect the vulnerable. That's who we are. It's what we do. As we read yesterday, we do so in the power of the Spirit. We put our trust in God. And we live out His values.

As God's chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession, people saved by Jesus, temporary residents and foreigners ... we do pray for the government (whether we like them or not). In the meantime, we live godly lives. We love God. We love our neighbour. We love one another. We live with

integrity. We live our faith. And we get up tomorrow and continue to do what is true, honourable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and worthy of praise – in the name of Jesus.

Lord, help us to get busy about the business of being your people, your priests, your hands and feet, your good news in practical service ...

*Take from us, God, the care of worldly vanities.
Make us content with only the necessities of life.
Keep our hearts from delighting in honors, treasures, and the pleasures of this life.
Put in us a desire to be with you in your eternal kingdom.
Give us Lord, such taste and feeling for your unspeakable joys and heaven
that we may always long for them.
May we say, with all your people,
'Your Kingdom come, Lord; your will be done, Lord;
in and through my life, Lord';
for the sake of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns, ever one God, world without end.
Amen.*

Edmund Grindal (1519-1583)

Tuesday, October 19: John 14:1-27

As the church – as God's people – we keep on keeping on being God's chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession, people saved by Jesus, and "temporary residents and foreigners." What does that mean, in practice? It means that we continue to care for the poor, seek justice for those who suffer, visit the lonely, model good stewardship, practice peacemaking, encourage the discouraged, forgive one another, love unconditionally, live with integrity, be merciful, speak the truth, share God's good news ... In practice we keep on being and doing what the church (at its best) has done for two thousand years.

That can seem overwhelming. But Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 and Jesus' words in John 14 remind us that we do not do this on our own. We are Jesus' church. And He has given us – personally and corporately – the gift of His Holy Spirit. His Spirit will guide us, inspire us, and empower us to be His people.

Notice three times in this reading Jesus says, "*If you love me, obey my commandments*" (14:15, 21, 23). The reality is that our love for Jesus is expressed in how we live. If we genuinely love Jesus, we will aspire to be the people He calls us to be – people of love, mercy, compassion, and grace (review the Sermon on the Mount, for instance (Matthew 5-7)).

Does this seem unrealistic in 2021? After all we live in divided, polarized times – how can we "love our enemies"? We live in tough economic times – can we afford to care for the poor? Refugees? We feel Christian values are under attack – should we really welcome other peoples into Canada?

Jesus spoke to a world with incredible poverty and human suffering – but His followers "*sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need*" (Acts 2:45). The church in the first few centuries faced far worse challenges than we do. They were brutally persecuted (Peter's encouragement yesterday to "*submit to all human authority*" and "*respect the king/Caesar*" was written during intense persecution under the evil Emperor Nero). Christians – and their values – were a tiny minority, and yet by loving God and loving their neighbour (not protesting, writing nasty tweets, or stomping off) they modelled a higher way ... and changed the world.

The early churches – inspired (literally "in-Spirited") by God, confident in the resurrection power of Jesus, and open to the Spirit's leading – transformed their communities and the world. With love. May the Lord help us – individually and as a church – and empower us with inner strength through his Spirit ... with love. What little act of obedience might He be asking me to do today? Encourage someone? Share my faith? Give practical assistance? Make a phone call? Pray for someone? Do something good for God's creation? Will you do it?

*How often when weary do we sigh,
 'The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.'
 How often when in prayer are thoughts distracted by sounds or circumstance,
 or prayers diverted by trivial concerns.
 Baggage carried with us rather than left at your feet.
 How often do we find ourselves apologising to you for our abbreviated prayer life.
 And yet you draw us still to be in your presence,
 as you did the disciples at Gethsemane.
 You want us to share in your life, to play our part.
 You told your disciples to watch and pray, so that they might not fall into temptation.
 Do you ask the same of us and do we also fail you,
 each time we whisper, 'The spirit is willing, but the body is weak'?
 Grant us the strength, Lord, of body and of spirit,
 to offer you the sacrifice of our lives
 Amen*

John Birch

Wednesday, October 20: Romans 14:1-19

The Barna Group in the U.S. recently surveyed average Americans about their perceptions of the church. *"Across the nation, a large percentage of unchurched people have negative views of the church, thinking that local churches are judgmental, hypocritical, irrelevant, disconnected from real issues in the community, and known more for what they are against."* Yikes. If people feel that way about the church – and Christians in general – why would they want to join us? It's no wonder we struggle to connect with non-church people ...

Paul wants us to focus on what is really important. *"For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink (or how we voted), but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up"* (14:17-19). People will want to connect with THAT kind of church.

Being God's church is a matter of living out the love, goodness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit. That's it. Isn't that great? We sometimes add so many layers of complexity – what we might eat or drink (or not), how we should have voted, what we must believe about ____ (fill in the blank with your favourite doctrine), what we should or should not do about ____ (fill in your pet peeve) ... We could go on and on. Paul emphasizes the key is to allow God's Spirit to lead us ... in a life of love, goodness, peace, and joy.

Paul elaborates on this in Romans 8:1-14 (emphasizing goodness, peace (with God), and joy (by being forgiven and filled with His Spirit)): *"There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit."*

"Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Spirit think about things that please the Spirit ... Letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace ... You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. ... And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you ... For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

May God help us be loving, good, peace-full, and joy-full today.

*Lord Jesus, I approach your banquet table with reverence and awe.
 I am a sinner and dare not rely on my own worth but only on your goodness and mercy.
 Gracious God of majesty and awe, I claim your protection and look for your healing.
 I come to you, the fountain of all mercy.
 I could not bear your judgment, but I do trust in your salvation.
 I have confidence in your mercies, for they cannot be numbered.
 Lord Jesus Christ, eternal King, God and man, I trust in you.
 Have mercy on me, for the depth of your compassion never ends.
 Praise to you, Saving Sacrifice, offered on the wood of the cross for me and for all mankind.
 Thank you for the noble and precious blood of my crucified Lord Jesus Christ,
 washing away the sins of the whole world.
 Remember, Lord, your creature, whom you have redeemed.
 I repent of my sins, and I want to make right the wrongs I have done.
 Merciful Father, take away all my offences and sins.
 Purify me, body and soul.
 Help me now to live for you.
 Amen.*

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

Thursday, October 21: Romans 15:1-13

The couple I was counseling had problems. I met with the husband and wife separately. The husband's issues were these: his wife was not sensitive to his needs; he wanted to do certain things and she didn't like it; he didn't want to have spend so much time looking after the kids; he didn't want to have to do things around the house ... The wife's issues were these: her husband was not sensitive to her needs; she wanted to do certain things and he didn't like it; she didn't want to have spend so much time looking after the kids; she didn't want to have to do things around the house ... See a problem? Or two? Or three?

Both people were focussed only on themselves. They could only see their own perceived needs. Those needs were not being met by the other person. When we only focus on our selves, relationships don't work well. The best marriages are between people who love each other as Jesus loved His church: selflessly seeking the best for the **other** person. The best marriages are the union of two good forgivers. The best marriages are between people who mutually submit to/sacrificially love one another (more next month).

Churches don't work well either when we're each focussed on **ourselves**. When we are irritated that **our** needs are not being met, we get miserable. We make people around us miserable. The best churches are those where people love each other as Jesus loved His church: selflessly seeking the best for the **other** person. The best churches are a community of good forgivers, who love each other unconditionally, who build up one another in love, who do what is best for one another, and who encourage one another.

Paul is challenging us to be this kind of church – a church where we celebrate the amazing sacrificial love of Jesus and live out that same kind of love for one another and for the world:

- "We must be considerate of others."
- "We must not just please ourselves."
- "We should help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord."
- "Live in complete harmony with each other."
- "Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory."

How can this happen? "God gives us this patience and encouragement. He helps us live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. ... Remember that Christ came as a servant to the Jews to show that God is true to the promises he made to their ancestors. He also came so that the Gentiles might give glory to God for his mercies to them."

With what result? *"Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ... God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit."*

May the Lord help us to be considerate of others, not just please ourselves, help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord, live in complete harmony with each other, and accept each other just as Christ has accepted us. May the world know we are Christians by our love.

*God, you know our hearts.
You see our temptations and struggles.
Have pity on us and deliver us from the sins which make war upon our souls.
You are all-powerful, and we are weak and erring.
Faithful God, our trust is in you.
Deliver us from the bondage of evil.
Help us be your devoted servants,
May we serve you in the freedom of holy love, for Jesus Christ's sake.
Amen.*

Eugène Bersier (1830-1903)

Friday, October 22: Romans 15:14-33

Former NFL quarterback Tim Tebow says, *"I'm not perfect. I'm never going to be. And that's the great thing about living the Christian life and trying to live by faith, is you're trying to get better every day. You're trying to improve."* I'm not perfect either. Far from it. How about you?

Paul, earlier in Romans, emphasized the same thing: *"No one is righteous – not even one: (3:10). On the heels of Paul's encouragement to love one another (Romans 15:1-13), he says to us: "I am fully convinced, my dear brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness. You know these things so well you can teach each other all about them. Even so, I have been bold enough to write about some of these points, knowing that all you need is this reminder."* In other words, they know what they are supposed to do. They just don't always do it.

Welcome to the real world. This is the real world of being – and living with – people who love Jesus. This is the real world of the church. We are generally "full of goodness." Sometimes we need reminders to be considerate of others, not just pleasing ourselves, helping others do what is right, building them up in the Lord, living in complete harmony with each other, and accepting each other as Christ has accepted us.

1 Corinthians 13 – the great "love chapter" in Scripture – is written **to the church**. We need to be reminded now and then this kind of love is what ought to define our relationships **at church**: *"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance"* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). This describes **church** relationships. Does it describe **your** relationships at church?

Artist Salvador Dalí said, *"Have no fear of perfection – you'll never reach it."* True. But as the people of God, we are called to keep our eyes on God, keep focussed on our mission and purpose (to make Jesus known locally and globally, through Word and deed (Romans 15:16-21)), pray for one another (Romans 15:30-32), and keep trying to be the people God is calling us to be. We will never be perfect. But we never stop trying to be better, either. And we are gracious to other fellow-strugglers on the journey. We live out God's love.

How is God encouraging you to continue growing? To love more along the lines of 1 Corinthians 13? To be a little bit more "good" in some part of your life? Who can you come alongside and graciously encourage?

*Jesus, when I have to deal with those who need you,
help me to talk to them the way you did.
When I meet those who are hurting and in need of a kind word or deed,
help me to reach out to them, just like you did.
When I see injustice or unrighteousness,
help me to see it the way you did and to confront it, just like you did.
When I have a decision to make,
remind me to go to the Father and talk to him about it, just like you did.
When I am mistreated or spoken ill of,
help me to respond to it without offering an 'eye for an eye,' just like you did.
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Saturday, October 23: Philippians 4:1-9

Do you want the bad news first or the good news? I always prefer to get bad news first – I like to get it over with. Deal with it. Then I can celebrate with the good news. That way, too, when I go to bed at night my mind is focused on the good news, not the bad.

So here's the bad news: the church in Philippi has a problem. Two ladies, Euodia and Syntyche, are having a spat. People in our church never have disagreements, do they? No, never (Bruce says, facetiously) ☺. Let's be honest, it happens. Paul urges these two people – and others in the church – to work their problems through in healthy ways so the church can be healthy and grow. Conflict isn't the problem – how we handle it can be.

Here's the good news: when we stay close to God, commit to work things through in love, and prioritize building one another up, we can deal with disagreements in healthy ways. We can even experience joy. Christian joy is not a warm fuzzy emotion (like happiness). It is a deep-rooted sense of knowing that, come hell or high water, our lives are safe and secure in God's hands. Therefore, no matter what we will not be shaken.

Paul actually writes these words about joy from prison in Rome. Despite his own physical suffering, he can find joy knowing that God is with him. That's amazing. That's inspiring.

And Paul has some great practical advice for us as we seek to live as the church:

- *"Stay true to the Lord."*
- *"Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice."*
- *"Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do."*
- *"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done."*
- *"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable."*
- *"Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise."*
- *"Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me."*

What will the result be? *"Then the God of peace will be with you ... Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."* By handling conflict well, honestly and prayerfully, we can experience God's joy – and peace.

It has been said "You are what you eat." But perhaps more profoundly, "You are what you think." As you choose to think about **Jesus**, thinking about His teachings, applying His principles, and praying to Him ... you find you become more and more like Him in character, more and more like Him in peace, more like Him in joy, and more and more like Him in love.

Spend some quality time today with Jesus ...

*Govern everything by your wisdom, Lord,
so that my soul may always be serving you as you choose, not as I choose.
Do not punish me, I implore you,
by granting that which I wish or ask for if it is not right for me.
Your love is that which I desire to always live and grow within me.
Let me die to myself that so I may serve you.
Let me live to you, who in yourself are the true life.
You are the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Sunday, October 24: Ephesians 4:11-16 (we'll come back to 4:1-10 next Sunday)

Darrell Guder writes, *"The purpose of missional communities (churches) is to be a source of radical hope, to witness to the new identity and vision, the new way of life that has become a social reality in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The persistent problem is not how to keep the church from withdrawing from the world, but how to keep the world from distracting the church from its purpose of cultivating the people of God. As sign, foretaste, agent, and instrument of God's reconciling love and forgiveness, the church makes Jesus Christ visible in the world. The church is a social reality that continually engages in the practices that cultivate people of truth, peace, wholeness, and holiness. The forming of Christian community is therefore not an option but the very lifestyle invocation of the church."*

In Ephesians, Paul is helping us think about how we can be a community living out God's mission of love. He identifies some of the blessings God has given to us to help this vision come to fruition. We all have gifts, talents, skills, experiences, and resources we can use to serve God. Paul is highlighting just a few specific examples of those in this passage. Notice the calling God gives to these people: *"Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ."*

Thank God for the gifted leaders we have in our church:

- our teachers/leaders (in children's ministries, youth programmes, adult classes, and small groups)
- our organizers/administrators (Council, facility people, finance people, custodial people ...)
- our pastors: both our fulltime/part-time "staff" and those who volunteer shepherding, leading, and caring for others informally too through various groups, visiting, and encouraging;
- those who have gifts of evangelism (sharing the good news with others).

We can be people of truth, peace, wholeness, and holiness, bringing God's reconciling love and forgiveness, who make Jesus Christ visible in the world. This happens as we learn (are informed by His Word). As we grow (are formed by His power). As we keep seeking to apply God's truth to more parts of our life (are transformed by His Spirit). As we ask hard questions and seek for satisfying answers. As we encourage one another. As we have a "holy restlessness" that keeps us moving forward in our relationship with God. *"Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth."*

"Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church." It is good – great – to speak the truth. Notice if we want to be like Christ, we speak the truth *in love*. What **IS** the difference between just speaking the truth and speaking the truth *in love*?

"How many times have you been told by another Christian that they're 'just speaking the truth', when a more honest assessment might be 'No you're not, you're just being a jerk,'" writes Carey Nieuwhof. *"Too many Christians try to pass off being abrasive and being self-righteous as being truthful. If you're speaking for Jesus, you just can't separate grace and truth. You can't. Speak the truth in love. You'd be amazed at how much more effective it is."* Thoughts?

As a church, we are called to be a source of radical hope ... to witness to a new identity and vision ... to live a new way of life ... to be the people of God ... How can I live as a follower of Jesus today?

*Lord, since you exist, we exist.
Since you are beautiful, we are beautiful.
Since you are good, we are good.
By our existence we honour you.
By our beauty we glorify you.
By our goodness we love you.
Lord, through your power all things were made.
Through your wisdom all things are governed.
Through your grace all things are sustained.
Give us power to serve you, wisdom to discern your laws,
And grace to obey those at all times.
Amen*

Edmund Rich (1180-1240)

Monday, October 25: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Dale Pagitt writes, *"In many ways, becoming a Christian is much like learning our native language; we pick it up when we are immersed in it. I would guess that nearly all of us spoke a language long before we started our formal education. What we then learned in school is not the beginning of language use, but the refining of it. In educational settings, the theory of language acquisition through immersion is by far the most successful means of learning. So it is with Christian faith. Rather than seeing Christianity as belief we acquire a completed form, we ought to enter into it with the understanding that we are at the beginning of a lifelong process of discovery and change. Ours is a faith that is lived, from beginning to end. Community as a means of spiritual formation serves to immerse people in the Christian way of living so that they learn how to be Christian in a lifelong process of discovery and change."* At its best, being part of a church is immersion in culture of the Kingdom of God.

In ancient Jewish culture, people were instructed to immerse themselves – and their families and friends – in the language of God's truth. Then they would truly become the people of God.

Martin Copenhaver expresses the same principle this way: *"Being a religious person is somewhat analogous to learning a new language ... to become a Christian is to enter a culture, a complex system of rituals, words, signs, symbols, habits, and practices that make us who we are. To be a Christian is to be someone who has learned the language, someone for whom the grammar of the Christian faith has become part of your life."*

"The way in which you learn grammar is not by memorizing a book of grammatical rules. The way you learn to speak grammatically is to be immersed in a setting where words are used in a certain way. To be sure, memorizing a grammar book takes less time and can be done in isolation. But to fully get the grammar of faith one must be part of a community that speaks grammatically. For instance, you come to know what 'sin' means by hearing the word used in a variety of situations and contexts. It is a slow business, but there is no substitute." We learn faith by being immersed in a genuine culture/community of faith – a church.

It makes sense, doesn't it? We discover what it means to be a living, growing, loving, forgiving, patient, self-controlled person of faith by observing real living, growing, loving, forgiving, patient, self-controlled people of faith. And other people learn to be people of faith, in turn, from us ...

Of course, we're not perfect. We never will be. So we also model being honest, humble, asking-for-forgiveness people of faith. We model being getting-up-and-trying-to-do-better-next-time people of faith.

Pray that God would help you see how His truth applies to more and more areas of your life? How can you live His truth, day by day? And pray for others who are also learning what it means to follow Jesus ...

*Hold us fast, Lord of hosts, that we won't fall from you.
 Grant us thankful and obedient hearts,
 that our faith in the love, knowledge, in fear of you will increase daily.
 Increase our faith and help our unbelief.
 May we live godly lives to the praise and good example of your people
 and after this life reign with you forever, through Christ our Savior.
 Amen.*

James Pilkington (1520-1576)

Tuesday, October 26: Leviticus 19:1-19

We learn languages by repetition. I took Latin back in Grade 11: I still remember the basic verb pattern: *amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant* (I love, you (singular) love, he/she loves, we love, you (plural) love, they love) because I repeated it so often. It's not surprising, then, that the Bible repeats basic principles of faith over and over again, too. Then we may actually learn them. They become basic things we never forget (I'm not sure learning Latin verbs did me much good, but learning biblical principles sure does).

Leviticus includes several of God's lessons to Moses, which he is commanded to repeat to the Israelites. Among other things, God tells the Israelites how to conduct themselves as the people of God. Notice how many of the basic principles are similar to the Ten Commandments (themselves repeated in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5):

- *"Each of you must show great respect for your mother and father."*
- *"You must always observe my Sabbath days of rest."*
- *"Do not put your trust in idols or make metal images of gods for yourselves."*
- *"Do not steal."*
- *"Do not deceive or cheat one another."*
- *"Do not bring shame on the name of your God by using it to swear falsely."*
- *"Do not defraud or rob your neighbor."*

Notice some of the other principles ...

- *"When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. It is the same with your grape crop – do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you."*
- *"Do not make your hired workers wait until the next day to receive their pay."*
- *"Do not insult the deaf or cause the blind to stumble."*
- *"Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people fairly."*
- *"Do not spread slanderous gossip among your people."*
- *"Do not stand idly by when your neighbor's life is threatened."*
- *"Do not nurse hatred in your heart for any of your relatives."*
- *"Confront people directly so you will not be held guilty for their sin."*
- *"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge."*

What is the basic principle in all this? *"Love your neighbor as yourself"* (19:18). Look at each of those specific principles Leviticus 19 speaks about: if the point is not about *"Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:6), it is about *"Loving your neighbor as yourself."* You can go through any specific command in the Old or New Testament and categorize it either as a way we show love to God (having no other gods, not misusing His name, honouring the Sabbath, etc.) or a way we show love to other people (not stealing, lying, cheating, committing adultery, coveting, etc.).

Think about everything you say or do today ...

- Will it show your love to God (reading Scripture, prayer, thanksgiving, holy/noble thoughts, etc.)?
- Will it show love to other people (saying kind words, helping someone out, calling someone who is lonely, being gracious, sharing your faith, etc.)?

OR will what you do NOT honour God (what might that include?)? Will what you do or say NOT be loving to another person (what might that entail? Criticism? Anger? Sharp words? Gossip?)? What will you do and say?

*Lord, grant us faith.
The faith that removes the mask from the world and shows us God in all things.
The faith that shows us Christ where our eyes see only a poor person.
The faith that shows us the Savior where we feel only pain.
Lord, grant us faith.
The faith that inspires us to undertake everything that God wants without hesitation,
without shame, without fear, and without ever retreating.
The faith that knows how to go through life with calm, peace, and profound joy.
The faith that makes the soul filled with all the blessing that comes from you.
Amen*

Charles de Foucauld (1856-1915)

Wednesday, October 27: Mark 12:28-34

When Jesus is asked, "*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*" He responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "*Listen, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.*" He also quotes Leviticus 19:18: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" He is calling the Jewish people of His day back to the great calling they had in the days of Moses. Why? Because over the centuries, God's living, breathing, fresh, and dynamic call to LOVE Him and others had devolved into a morbid rulebook of "DON'Ts" (not too many "do's" in there).

People had lost the Spirit of love, freedom, grace, mercy, joy, and mission that was intended to shape their lives so they were a blessing to others. Their religion had become a legalistic set of rules about things NOT to do.

Now Jesus, master teacher that He is, calls them back to Moses, the great teacher of Israel's past. He calls them back to the principles that are foundational to everything else: DO LOVE God and DO LOVE other people. He calls them back to Abraham's mission to be a blessing to all people. To BE people of love. To DO something.

Think about what it means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. You could make a long list of things you should NOT do if you love God: you shouldn't swear using God's name, you shouldn't cheat God; you shouldn't lie to God, etc. A list of rules was exactly what the Pharisees created. As long as you didn't do any of those bad things, you were OK. But just because you didn't do anything bad to God doesn't mean you DO LOVE Him, does it? Rather than listing all sorts of "Thou shalt not's" what might it look like to **actually DO LOVE God**? What would you actually, actively **DO**?

Think about what it means to love your neighbour as yourself. Again, you could make a long list of things you should NOT do: you shouldn't steal, lie, injure, backstab, murder, etc. The Pharisees made such a list. So, as long as you didn't do any of those bad things, you were OK. But just because you don't do anything bad to another person doesn't mean you DO LOVE them, does it? Rather than listing all sorts of "Thou shalt not's" what might it look like to **actually DO LOVE people** around you? What would you actually, actively **DO**?

Jesus focusses on two great "***This is what you should DO***" (love God, love your neighbour) commands rather than dozens of "Thou shalt not" commands. If I am actually using the filter of "love for God" and "love for others" to inspire and guide my words and actions, I won't do rotten things. More than that, I will find new, creative, exciting ways to make a positive difference in people's lives that far exceeds any do-not-do list some

religious leader might make. I will SAY and DO positive things that make the world better.

- What is one practical way you can love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength today?
- What is one practical way you can love your neighbour as yourself today?

*Jesus, poor, unknown, and despised, have mercy on us.
Let us not be ashamed to follow you.
Jesus, accused, and wrongfully condemned,
teach us to bear insults patiently, and let us not seek our own glory.
Jesus, crowned with thorns and hailed in derision;
buffeted, overwhelmed with injuries, griefs and humiliations.
Jesus, hanging on the accursed tree, bowing the head, have mercy on us.
Conform our whole lives to your Spirit.
Amen.*

John Wesley (1703-1791)

Thursday, October 28: James 2:14-26

"I may 'know' something," says Christian educator Linda Cannell, "but what is more important is that I have 'learned' something." She argues that education is really about learning. "Learning involves reflection, decision making, perception, discernment, finding connections in information, in ways that lead to renewed integration into life and experience." Learning is about integrating what we know into our behaviours, attitudes and value systems. Learning takes what we know and puts it into practice. Learning changes us.

Sometimes we think that Christian education simply means gaining information. We teach "the Bible." We teach good doctrine. People memorize facts and figures, names and places, proof-texts and platitudes ... but still many do not live "Christian-ly." It's in their heads. But maybe not in their hearts. Or hands. Or feet.

Think about it. The Devil has excellent theology. He knows the Bible inside out and backwards, in the original languages. His doctrine of the Trinity is bang on. He understands the true meaning of Genesis 1 & 2 way better than any Old Testament scholar. He understands eschatology (end times) perfectly. He knows what those prophetic passages mean far better than I do. But having all that information does not make the Devil a Christian. All the right knowledge does him no good because he isn't going to actually put his faith in Jesus and act on his knowledge (don't hold your breath waiting for that to happen!).

I've known people like that in churches. They "know" the Bible. They "know" correct theology. But their lives don't evidence the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). They have no joy. They are judgmental. Angry. Bitter. Unloving. Unforgiving. Unhappy. Unkind. Their personal lives are a mess. Their relationships with family and friends are in shambles.

James writes, *"What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? ... you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless. Now someone may argue, 'Some people have faith; others have good deeds.' But I say, 'How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.'" (James 2:14-18)*

James goes on to say, *"You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you. Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish. Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?" (2:19).* Information, without formation, and without transformation, is useless.

What do you "know" (information) that you may not have "learned" (put into practice) yet? How does your life need to be formed and transformed by God's Spirit? What do you need to reflect on? What do you need to integrate into your life and experience? What decisions do you need to make? What will you do about it?

*God, make me pray for life: O, braver than this.
 Let me straighten after pain, as a tree straightens after the rain, shining and lovely again.
 God, make me pray for life. O much braver than this.
 As the blown grass lifts, let me rise from sorrow with quiet eyes, knowing your way is wise.
 God, make me brave. Life brings such blinding things.
 Help me to keep my sight.
 Help me to see the fact that out of darkness comes light.
 Amen*

Unknown

Friday, October 29: James 1

"If dumping content on people produced mature Christians," writes Frank Tillipauagh, "the church in the U.S. (and Canada) would be by far the most mature church which history has ever seen." Is that the case?

"The effort of the years to inculcate Bible knowledge has largely failed," comments Linda Cannell. "Is biblical literacy a matter of knowing facts about the Bible? Is it enough just to know the major themes and concepts of Scripture? Is it adequate to know in general story form, the most popular stories in Scripture? What will help persons fashion a suitable frame of reference for biblical understanding and practice of the Christian faith?" Those are good questions. Hard questions. (Questions I often ask myself)

*"Wisdom" is a more popular word than "knowledge" in both the Old and New Testaments. **Wisdom means having knowledge, understanding how to apply it to your life – AND actually acting on it.** Wisdom includes knowledge, but moves way beyond that, to apply that truth to my life, AND to live it out in practice.*

James reminds us life is not always easy. We can struggle (interestingly prosperity/health-and-wealth preachers never teach James 1). Knowing that life can be hard is knowledge/information. Knowing God's promise that He is with you through those times is good knowledge/formation (Matthew 28:19-20). Wisdom/transformation comes when, you understand that *"when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow."* Wisdom/transformation is when you tackle problems with the resolute determination to *"let it (your endurance) grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."*

James goes on to talk about specific ways in which knowledge and practice must combine into wise ways of living: *"But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it."*

He continues, saying specifically, *"If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you."*

In what ways can we integrate our faith into practice? How is God challenging me to grow in wisdom?

*Lord Christ, Lamb of God, Lord of lords,
 call us, who are called to be saints, along the way of your cross.
 Draw us, who would draw nearer our King, to the foot of your cross.
 Cleanse us, who are not worthy to approach, with the pardon of your cross.
 Instruct us, the ignorant and blind, in the school of your cross.
 Bring us, in the fellowship of your sufferings, to the victory of your cross.
 Seal us in the kingdom of your glory among the servants of your cross, crucified Lord,
 who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
 one God, almighty, eternal, world without end.
 Amen.*

Eric Milner-White (1884-1963)

Saturday, October 30: James 3

"The deeds you do may be the only sermon some persons will hear today," writes Francis of Assisi. Think about that. How does that make you feel? How should you then live today? Will you do that?

As you read through James 3, James is reminding us **again** of the power of our tongues (or emails, social media posts, comments). Do you get the impression this is something James is passionate about? Why do think he is so concerned about this?

James' point, which he repeats over and over and over again, is that our faith and our lives must be integrated in wisdom. Our theology and our actions must be consistent.

"If you are wise and understand God's ways," James says, *"prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind."*

Wisdom, for James, is eminently practical and applied to real life: *"But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness."* We live out our faith.

- How can you live wisely today?
- How can the sermon you speak through your deeds inspire others today?
- Jesus says, *"I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples"* (John 13:34-35). How can you live that out in your life, today?

*Let us go forth
in the goodness of our merciful Father,
in the gentleness of our brother Jesus,
in the radiance of his Holy Spirit,
in the faith of the apostles,
in the joyful praise of the angels,
in the holiness of the saints,
in the courage of the martyrs.*

*Let us go forth
in the wisdom of our all-seeing Father,
in the patience of our all-loving Brother,
in the learning of the apostles,
in the gracious guidance of the angels,
in the patience of the saints,
in the self-control of the martyrs.*

*Such is the path for all servants of Christ,
the path from death to eternal life.*

Amen.

Celtic prayer

Sunday, October 31: Ephesians 4:1-10

We can snipe at other people about all sorts of things ...

- We can gripe about our neighbours
- We can complain about our family
- We can hold on to a grudge against _____, _____, _____ (fill in the blanks – add more if necessary)
- We can make/post nasty comments about politicians and government policies
- We can criticize our church, pastor, doctor, dentist, teacher, salesclerk, school ...

When it comes to church, we can dissect the sermon, moan about the music, chastise the children, complain about decisions made, criticize someone's opinion, gripe about not enough sermons on _____ (pick your pet theme), blast the pastor about _____ (take your pick). This passage challenges us to stop complaining. Instead, we should celebrate what we have in common as church(es) and what is really important: our faith in Jesus.

We need to focus on the important things – our belief in and love for our loving Father, our Saviour Jesus, our Comforter the Holy Spirit. We can let the irritations and issues go. They just don't matter.

In a Canadian culture where fewer and fewer people call themselves Christians and far fewer still attend church, we need to get over our human tendency to tear one another apart. No one wants to be part of a church that attacks one another. A church that's judgmental. A church that's angry. Why would they? Instead, people are attracted to a church that focusses on Jesus, that keeps His life, death, and resurrection central, that talks about hope, that lives unconditional love, that seeks to see His Kingdom come and His will be done on earth ...

Paul reminds us of the virtues we should model:

- *"Always be humble and gentle."*
- *"Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love."*
- *"Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace."*

This sounds like the wisdom James has been talking about. It sounds like, *"Love your neighbour as yourself."*

Paul goes on to emphasize that we can celebrate our unity on the IMPORTANT points of our faith:

- *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future."*
- *"There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all."*

This sounds a lot like *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength."*

I need to be careful I don't cause division, conflict, or controversy over things God Himself doesn't consider essential. God is concerned with truth (on a very few core points). God is also VERY concerned about love, grace, and unity. If you read on to Ephesians 4:15, Paul brings these two principles together: *"Speak **the truth in love**, growing in every way more and more like Christ."* Some of us like the "speak the truth" bit. Throughout Scripture this is held in dynamic tension with the explicit command, *"in love."* Being humble, gentle, patient – and loving – we can encourage one another in faith. That is godly wisdom.

This week we've thought about the two great commands (to love God, to love our neighbour). We have thought about wisdom – taking what we know and actually putting it into practice. Paul is calling us to live our faith in the church, our families, and our community. When we do that, we can share His love in a genuine, practical, attractive, and dynamic way. People will know we are Christians by our love.

Teresa of Avila wrote, *"Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are*

the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet by which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands by which he is to bless us now."

- How can I live humbly today? Gently? Patiently?
- How can I make allowance for other people's faults?
- I have experienced God's love – how can I love others in the same way?
- How can I build bridges of unity?
- How can I live in peace with those around me?

*Sovereign, awe-inspiring majesty – all-knowing, all powerful –
Goodness, gracious to my soul – Highness, Three-in-One and one-in-Three –
Look at me, me who is as nothing – singing out my love for you:
What would you like done with me?*

*I am yours because you made me – yours, because you redeemed me –
Yours, because you suffered for me – yours, because you chased after me –
Yours, because you did not lose me – yours, because you always hold me –
What would you like done with me?*

*Love you with all my heart – and love my neighbour as myself –
These commands I will do – these commands are central in my heart.
My love for you and yours is but a pale reflection of your love for me:
What would you like done with me?*

*Here is my heart – I put it in your hand:
My body, my soul, everything that I am – my mind, my passions, everything is yours:
My great Redeemer who gave all for me – I offer back all to you:
What would you like done with me?*

*If I am silent or if I am speaking – if I am bearing fruit or bearing nothing,
Show me the way in which I should go – correct me; guide me in right paths.
I only truly live when I live with you – fill me completely with your Spirit, my Jesus.
What would you like done with me?*

*In You I live and come to be – what would you like done with me?
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)