

First Presbyterian Church
Gal. 5:1-6. “The Only Thing that Counts”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, Oct. 6th

[While trying to walk on a make-shift balance beam...]

I try to walk the straight and narrow path. It’s not easy, but I do my best.

Busy life, family, work hard, help my neighbors when I can.

I believe in God, that’s why I volunteer and give to those in need.

Things can get tough – my family gets in fights, work gets stressful,

keep up with the news, and the world is so depressing.

But I just keep doing my best,

trying to do what God wants, and I hope in the end

I’ve done more good than bad,

and hopefully God will accept me when I get to heaven.

Walking the balance beam is the default theology of our culture:

“I’m basically a good person. If I do more good things than bad things,

hopefully God will notice and let me in.

But if you just live selfishly and don’t do unto others

as you would have them do unto you,

then things might not turn out so good for you.”

I grew up with this kind of spirituality.

I walked around with a huge amount of shame for not being good enough,

always wondering how I could be better and do better,

not trying to impress friends with dirty jokes,

not looking at girls in the wrong way,

not talking back to my parents.

The church talked a lot about forgiveness,

but the underlying message was that we should really

be in church every week and do our devotions and be really good,

and if we weren’t then that was shameful to the community.

When you grow up in that kind of environment,

it creates a kind of default perspective that we go back to whenever

things get out of balance in our lives and we experience anxiety.

And so we worry and wonder, “Am I walking the balance beam well enough?”

Philosophically, this is utilitarian ethics. Utilitarianism says

we should try to do what will create the most utility, or benefit, or goodness,

in the world around.

Some things might create harm from one perspective,
but do more overall good from another perspective,
and so if the outcome is a net positive, that's what you should do.

From a utilitarian perspective,
there could be an accounting of a person's life
that would sort out how often they were able to
stay on the balance beam and create
the most good for the world, and how often they fell off.

Do you recognize this perspective? Do you ever find yourself wondering
how well you need to do in walking the balance beam?
Do you see this in your coworker, neighbor, family member or friend?
It is an amazingly common perspective,
referenced all the time in TV and movies.

With the balance beam analogy, let's talk about Simone Biles. The GOAT.
We watched her in awe this summer as she returned to dominance.
She won the individual all around.

She helped win the team all around.

This is her final grand tour as the greatest gymnast the world has ever seen.
She got to the individual balance beam final.

Everyone knows what's coming. She's the best. She's got this.
We're witnessing history.

This is the embodiment of greatness, discipline, and control.

Simone Biles fell off the balance beam.

She began her routine normally,
she was methodically progressing through each skill,
and then at the end of her acrobatic section, she slipped.

She fell off. And she didn't get a medal.

She blew it! Why?

Because there are forces at work that constantly seek to throw us off,
and nobody does it perfectly. Not even the best.

The Galatians, who mostly were not of Jewish descent,
were being told by Paul's rivals to trust in the identity marker
of the Jewish law. If they followed the law, the rival's said,
they would belong to God's people, Israel
and find forgiveness and grace through Jesus the Messiah.

The apostle Paul tells the Galatians that they have two options:

- 1) faith in Christ alone, trusting entirely in God's grace, or
- 2) walk perfectly on the balance beam of the Law and never fall off.

Paul is telling the Galatians that if they turn back to following the law, then they are going to have to follow it *perfectly*.

They need to be better at following the law than Simone Biles is at gymnastics. Think about that.

For me, this recalls what Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Wow, that sounds harsh. Why be so uptight and perfectionistic?

God's not perfectionistic – the law is.

God is gracious, loving, merciful, and wants you to draw near.

The way to draw near to God *is by faith*.

Through faith we encounter God's grace.

But there is one thing that can prevent that.

We hear about it in the puzzling line of v. 4:

“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

Fallen away from grace...

Grace means forgiveness for when we mess up.

And there's nothing God can't forgive.

So why can't there be grace

for trying to be made right through the law?

How can we fall away from grace?

Among the horrible videos from hurricane Helene over the past week,

I saw one of a woman in a house

that was about to be swept away by the flooding waters.

She wanted to stay in her home,

but if she stayed there when got swept away, she would surely drown.

There was a way to safety, but to get to it, she would have to leave her home and float in the water to people waiting for her below.

In the video, the house visibly begins to drift and shudder.

It's about to go down the river.

At the last moment, this woman jumps into the water
(with a life jacket on) and is swept down the river alone.

There's no way she can swim to safety.

But rescuers throw themselves into the water and catch her,
and bring her back to shore.

Here's how I see it:

Staying in the house is hoping that we can be good enough on our own.
It's tempting, but it will never work. Eventually we will slip.

The way of faith is jumping in to the river.

It's letting go of control and trusting God to save us in a situation
that we are powerless to overcome.

It's terrifying, unless Jesus really is who the Bible says he is.

The rescuers are the grace of God.

God's grace is there for anyone, but the only way to connect with it
is by faith. We have to let go of the things we *think*
make us secure and truly trust that God will hold us
within the raging waters.

If we don't trust God by faith, then we stay in the house.

We trust what we can control. We stay where we're familiar.

We hope for the best. That is what it means to fall away from grace.

It doesn't mean God won't save you or that you missed your chance.

It means you are choosing not to put your faith in God alone.

V. 6 is the most important verse in the passage.

After saying all this about "You better not trust in the law!"

"I better not catch you circumcising each other!"

After all of that, Paul writes,

"For in Christ Jesus

neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value."

Essentially, you have genuine freedom with regard to this kind of thing.
The first line of our passage is so powerful on this point:
It was for freedom that Christ has set you free.

Do you live with genuine freedom? Faith in Christ is the way to genuine freedom,
not the political slogan kind, not the cheap thrills kind,
not the “get out of my way I’m exercising my rights” kind ...
genuine freedom as one who knows your life is lived
in vital connection to the Creator of all things.

It was for this freedom that Christ has set us free ...
so why would we give ourselves over to something
that binds us up in anxiety and fear?

“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”

Only one thing.

Take a deep breath and let that reality sweep over you.
“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”

Whoever you are, however your life is configured, *you have access to this reality.*

I want you to say that phrase with me:
“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”

You know this and I know this.
But it takes a lifetime to allow it to sink into the core of our being.
Every day is another opportunity to practice being God’s child,
no matter how many times we fall off the balance beam.