

Over the last number of weeks, we have been thinking about the Grace of God. We've been doing this by looking at a number of specific words. So far, we have thought about the mercy and patience of God. Today we're thinking of the word discipline – we're not using this word in the sense that God disciplines, although at times he does, rather we're thinking about our discipline – that determination to do what is right and reject what is wrong. To be disciplined in how we live.

Normally when we read this passage of Galatians we focus on the fruits of the spirit, today we're taking time to think about how those fruits are cultivated in our lives, the conditions in which they grow.

One of the reasons Paul was writing to the Galatian church was because of the way in which they were living. They weren't living as the Corinthians were, Paul in his letters to that church had to rebuke people for sleeping with their mother-in-law, for the way in which they treated each other with contempt and a lack of love. When the Corinthians were meeting for communion, some brought a feast fit for a king and ate to beyond their fullness and drank in the same measure, while others had barely enough. There was no sense of community or family, and morality was an incredibly loose term or notion.

The Galatians were different. Holiness, living in accordance with the law meant everything to them. As strange as this might sound, that was the problem. The Galatian church was depending on their own righteousness, it was as though they had to earn their place with God. If they didn't score high enough in the doing the right thing exam the fear was God would reject them.

The reason this creates a problem, other than the fact that we can never be sure that we have actually been good enough to earn God's pleasure, is that this desire and need to right and to be doing the right thing leads to disharmony and discontent. One group would argue with another regarding orthodoxy.

We see this in the church today. We argue of baptism, method of baptism, who can be baptised; we even argue of when baptisms can be carried out. Sunday observance is another example. It's not that long ago that the general assembly of our church was picketed because other churches disagreed with our involvement with other denominations.

At the heart of all these issues is the notion that we need to be right, that if we get some of this wrong then God will be less than pleased with us. There's no question we're trying to do the right thing, we try to keep the law, God's law but our motivation is self-centred. We want merit, recognition, we want to be right to gain brownie points with God. We are the beneficiaries of our good deeds, our law keeping.

This is what Paul calls being slaves to the law. We strive and strive and strive at being good, it becomes such a preoccupation that we argue and fall out with people we think are not being as good as we are, or who might spoil or leave a blemish on our good record.

When Paul talks about being free from the law, he was talking about a freedom from this inane need to be almost perfect. It was a reminder that we are not measured by our own righteousness, our own goodness, but the goodness and righteousness of Jesus Christ which is

freely given to us. Crucially this freedom from the law, this grace, is not a license for us to do whatever we want, instead we are to use this freedom to love one another. So, instead of spending our time arguing with people who baptise in a different way, or who play football on a Sunday or who do whatever number of other things we disagree with, be they great or small, we simply love them.

Paul said if we do this then we are actually keeping all of the law.

The question is how, how do we make the move from working for own benefit to a position of loving our neighbour?

The answer is in discipline. The discipline to serve one another which comes from the discipline of keeping our eyes on Jesus.

Paul is very clear when we satisfy our own desires, we end up **biting and devouring** one another. (Galatians 5:15) The way out of this is what Paul calls **living by the Spirit**. (Galatians 5:16) The first step in this is starting to believe and trust that our righteousness is actually found in Jesus and not in what we have done, to stop that striving and seeking reward from God. That means stop worrying about who is right and who is wrong and just loving the people in front of us, regardless of who they are, or what they believe or what they have done.

This transforms our relationships within the church and outside the church.

This is where our own personal bible reading and prayer time becomes incredibly important. When we read our bibles, we are constantly reminding ourselves of the gospel and how it impacts our lives.

At times we have a tendency of thinking the gospel is for someone else. We reduce the gospel down to our need to repent of sin in order that we would be forgiven. While that is undoubtedly true, the gospel is so much more than that. It is the constant reminder to all of us that our hope, our righteousness is in Christ alone.

Regular bible reading keeps Christ's righteousness before us, it stops us from forgetting that it is him we depend on and him alone. On an almost daily basis (because I'm realistic about what we can achieve) we see again and again the goodness, the love of God, the price of Christ's righteousness because we are reminded again and again of the impact the cross has on our lives.

Paul put it this way when writing to the Corinthians ***Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.*** (1 Corinthians 6: 19-20)

This is the grace of God in our lives, that we are blessed with the righteousness of Jesus and so we don't have to strive, work for, fight for, argue for our own holiness, righteousness and good standing before God.

The way in which we see this grace impact us and change us so that our lives are actually changed is that we are disciplined; disciplined in focusing on Jesus, who he is and what he has done for us; we know this grace by being disciplined in our spiritual disciplines of bible study and prayer because that is where we are confronted with all that Jesus has done for us, how he has loved us.