

2021-05-02 We Should Not Make It Difficult

We Should Not Make It Difficult

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Del Ippolito]

Today's reading is Acts chapter 15, 1–21.

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹²The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.¹³ After

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they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ ‘After this I will return,

and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;

from its ruins I will rebuild it,

and I will set it up,

¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—

even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.’

¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

The word of the Lord.

It is my great pleasure to welcome Judy to our community – welcome her back, actually! If you guys were – “guys,” I shouldn't say “guys” – if everyone was part of the series that Judy did while Scott was away, you're going to get to see her again and enjoy her; if you haven't, you're in for a real treat. And so, it is my great pleasure to have Judy come and teach us from scripture and expand our hearts for God and expand our hearts for each other, so please join me in welcoming Judy, Pastor Judy Howard Peterson, to our congregation.

[Voice of Pastor Judy]

Good morning, Artisan friends! I feel like I kind of know a little bit of that emotion of the Apostle Paul when he said “I long to be with you” – I actually long to be with anybody these days, but I hope really soon we can be together face to face again. It has been far too long. And you all have been on quite a journey since we were last together, in fact, recently making clear your convictions about the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons, and how this is leading your

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community to leave your governing denomination so that your faith can move more fully into the work of love in your own place in Rochester.

I know this was no quick decision and that, for some of you, there is a lot of pain and loss in this decision. You had hoped that you could remain united with the denomination that in many ways has blessed you, which perhaps makes this decision even more remarkable, when we come to the conclusion that our love for those who are not yet here, or our love for those who are here and yet do not yet feel fully embraced, is more important even than our own blessing and comfort. And I feel honored to speak a bit into this sermon series, which is a part, I know, of your process of becoming an even more inclusive congregation where truly doors are open to all.

So, let me begin with this: the Evangelical Covenant Church has this lovely mission statement. “We join God in God's mission to see more disciples among more populations in a more caring and just world.” Now, this is not a new mission statement; God first announced it to Abraham. He said, “Through your offspring all nations of the earth are eventually going to be blessed.” We hear this mission again through the prophets in Isaiah 56, which was read during last week's message. This is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, I'm going to give them an everlasting name that they will not be cut off; and to the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, I will bring them to my holy mountain. My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” Or through the Great Commandment and Great Commission we hear this mission: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love all your neighbors, just like yourself;” “Go therefore into all the nations, and make disciples.”

It's not a new mission statement, but I love the simplicity and the clarity that the Evangelical Covenant Church uses to articulate it: “We join God in God's mission to see more disciples among more populations in a more caring and just world.” I want this! To join God in God's mission, to see more disciples in more populations, to be part of a more caring and just world. And I know you want this, too.

The question is: What happens if God's mission invites us into populations who *want* to become disciples, but who have been told they are not allowed full inclusion? Populations of people who are told that if they want to join, they will have to alter their identity, the identity of the body they were born in, and align with the majority of religious culture, if they want to be fully embraced. What happens when this population of people, a population who wants to become disciples, tells you that the requirements that have been set by the religious majority culture

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have been neither caring or just? Do you side with the majority religious culture or do you side with those who desire full inclusion? Those who have up to this point been denied care or justice.

More disciples in more populations is not a new mission, and full inclusion of everybody is not a new struggle for God's people. This mission and this struggle is at the heart of the text you've just heard read by Del this morning, from Acts chapter 15. And this mission and this struggle are at the crux of the conversation you've been having in your community. And this sermon series is part of the witness to your community's desire to remain true to the movement of the Spirit of God in the early church, as witnessed to in the book of Acts – a movement that you have heard, over the past few weeks, reveals God's mission is to move into new populations of people and to invite them to become full members of the family of God.

You heard about Peter's experience with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's very clear instruction not to call unclean or profane what God has made clean. We learned that in that passage found in Acts chapter 10, the Spirit is speaking of the Gentiles, the *arelim*. Now *arelim* – this is the word that means “uncircumcised” in Hebrew, a word that is often used as a pejorative for the Gentiles. They're not even called Gentiles, they're called the *arelim*. “Oh, the *uncircumcised*.” And often pejoratives are used for the excluded. In our vernacular, perhaps you would hear the Spirit saying something like this, “Don't call people a pejorative that I call my people.” In this passage, Cornelius, a Gentile, would serve as Peter's teacher, an *arelim* showing him in no uncertain terms those whom he had previously called a pejorative were very much a population chosen by God to join in God's mission.

You heard that news traveled super fast in the early church. It still does travel super fast, especially when you're embracing the *arelim*, the uncircumcised, the Gentiles. Peter had stepped beyond the previously discerned position of God's people, a position that had said that Jewish people were not allowed to go into the homes or to dine with the *arelim*. And you heard that when Peter told the religious leaders about the Spirit of God at work in this home, with this population and the members of his household in the *same* way that the Spirit had been at work among the circumcised, that Peter poses to the religious people this question, which is rather rhetorical: “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

The leaders of the church were quiet for a moment – super uncommon for leaders of the church – and then they did what anyone who remembers the mission of God – anyone who wants to join the mission of God to bless all the nations of the earth, to draw eunuchs and foreigners to God's self, to love all our neighbors as ourselves, to go into all the nations and all the

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populations to make disciples, you know, to see more disciples in more populations in a more caring and just world – they did what *anyone* would do who was actually getting to see this mission unfold in front of their eyes: they rejoiced that God was accomplishing God's mission and that they were getting to be a part of it! And the religious leaders affirmed – well, they had no interest in being a hindrance to such a blessing.

Last week you heard that God's Spirit orchestrated an encounter between Philip and a foreigner who is also a eunuch. And then in that encounter as Philip opens the scriptures and teaches the eunuch about Jesus, that when the eunuch hears the plain reading of the text, the eunuch says: “Well, what is there to prevent me from being fully included?” and Philip cannot think of ONE thing. So Philip joins God and God's mission to see more disciples and more populations and Philip joined God in creating a more caring and just world by fully embracing this individual, a foreigner who is also a eunuch, who had just experienced the injustice of exclusion at the temple in Jerusalem. Philip joined God in creating a more caring and just world by participating with this foreigner, who is also a eunuch, in baptism, the most sacred right of the early church. And I don't want to get ahead of myself right here, but this seems to say that we as leaders of the church, if we're going to be faithful to the scriptures, we should not hesitate to participate in the most sacred rites of the church along with those who have been previously excluded from these rights. Can you imagine getting to be a part of and personally witnessing this new expansion of the mission of God to people whom you had thought would never be included? Can you imagine the joy of getting to not only witness, but be a part of it? Artisan I think you can imagine it, which is why I think you're in this place, but ‘more disciples in more populations’ was not without its tensions. And one of the primary tensions that came up was whether or not the uncircumcised had to be circumcised in order to truly and for real for real become a part of God's people.

Chapter 15 begins that certain individuals came down from Judea and had been teaching the brothers: Hey, you have to be circumcised, if you actually want to be saved. And after Paul and Barnabas had heard all this dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some others are appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question. What are we going to do now? Now, we could say, come on, You have seen the Spirit at work in the *arelim*. What in the world do you need to discuss? Why are you getting all legalistic and making circumcision a requirement? And I get this frustration, but hear me out. I think labeling this tension about circumcision as just about legalism doesn't really do the tension justice. Because you see circumcision had been a right, a ritual given by God from the beginning to the people of Israel. In Genesis chapter 17 God says to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout the generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God

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to you and to your offspring after you, and I will give to you and to your offspring after you, the land which you are now on that you are an alien. All the land of Canaan for a perpetual holding, and I will be your God.” God said to Abraham, “As for you, this is how you're going to keep my covenant: You and your offspring, and after you throughout all the generations. This is my covenant forever, which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised, you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins and it shall be a sign of a covenant between me and you throughout your generations, every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slaves born in your house and the one you bought with money from any foreigner who is not your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with money also must be circumcised, so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting everlasting covenant, and any uncircumcised male, any male who is not circumcised in the flesh shall be cut off from his people, for he has broken my covenant.”

You see, circumcision had been established by God. It was not an arbitrary law, some rule they put in that they never had any rooting in any sort of godliness, but it was the very thing that testified that they were God's people. And that God was their god, and you know what if you take a look at Jewish history. They might have needed that reminder, more than just a few times, that they were God's chosen people. It's easy for us as Gentile Christians to, to paint the Pharisees as this privileged people just trying to keep us out. But the truth is the Jewish people were a habitually enslaved and persecuted people. And I know that when we are marginalized as people in any way, or even when we go through a rough patch as privileged people, it can be hard to hang on to our belief that God has invested in us, that God has not forsaken us. And the Jewish people were habitually in this hard place and circumcision had been their constant embodied reminder that no matter what circumstances said: No, we really are God's people. During the Babylonian exile the Sabbath and circumcision - these were the two things that kept them unique and and reminded that even though they were away from home they were still a people. Circumcision you see was a treasured gift. It had been a grace. It was the way they knew that forever and for always they were going to belong to God. It was an everlasting sign of the covenant. It was the oldest identifying right of the Jewish people. And there had been whole seasons of life, more than one season in fact, where Jewish people had been persecuted for practicing circumcision. Under Antiochus Epiphanes, circumcision had been prohibited. And it was so valuable to the Jewish people as a reminder, they continued to do it even under the threat of punishment, and in second Maccabees 6: 10, it says two women were brought in for having circumcised their children and they publicly paraded these women around the city with the babies hanging at their breasts and then they hurled them down the wall as a punishment. You see circumcision wasn't just about being better than someone, it was a way to remind

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themselves that they were someone even when the world was telling them that they mattered to no one.

This is circumcision. This was the right of inclusion and was not just seen as a method of exclusion by the people in the temple. It was a gift. And this isn't nothing to have something that reminds us that no matter what we still belong to God. I want to talk about this because so often we label the Jewish commitment to circumcision as just a commitment to legalism, and certainly it was some of the time, but it wasn't all of the time. And if we label it that in a universal way, then, then we believe that if we're not being legalistic, then we don't struggle with patterns and behaviors that are exclusionary. But many of the things we hold on to we hold on to because they are gifts to us. And so we never even consider that the things that have been gifts to us... they could be exclusionary to people as well. Many of you know that I was the campus pastor at North Park University where I had the privilege of walking with so many young people. And one of the great privileges was being the person present when many of these young adults were coming out for the first time, whom I got to walk with through the process of then coming out to their own parents, many of whom were then very hurt by their parents who didn't always handle it very well. And they would come back into my office and I would spend some time. Time unpacking this pain with them. And I would offer this bit about circumcision. Just as a way to consider that their parents' response might not be just legalistic. I would offer this, they might be legalistic, but it could also be true that a piece of this is that they, they want to pass on their heterosexual cis gender marriage because they were blessed by it because they found blessing and a traditional family structure. And because they were so blessed by it, they, they are often blind to the fact that what they've experienced as a grace can become exclusionary for other people, even if they don't mean it to be.

So we need to identify with the Pharisees, so we can identify with the reality that sometimes it can feel really hard to change the way we've always done things, especially if circumcision has been a blessing to us. And this hard feeling - it doesn't mean that God isn't in the change. It just means it's a hard feeling. It's hard to let go of something that blessed you. Change can feel wrong, and still be right. And things can be good, and still need to be let go. Here too I think we can rightly make the connection between circumcision, and cis gender heterosexual marriage for it to have been around for as long as anyone can remember. In fact, opponents of gay marriage point to Adam and Eve and defend God's design of marriage being only between a man and a woman saying: Well, clearly, this has been the design from the beginning, and it will remain forever. And I want to push here a little bit because circumcision was the first holy right given by God to God's people. Arguably, it was their most treasured religious right from the beginning. And yet, the Spirit of God began to bless people outside of this traditional boundary,

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and the disciples began to take note of God's work. You see, the disciples didn't begin or proselytize this move - this move away from this traditional boundary of circumcision. The apostles weren't saying: hey let's do this. They merely testified that they had seen the Spirit doing this all along, and apparently what the Spirit was doing was moving the boundary beyond what had been traditionally affirmed.

Now let me go back to the text, and verse four says: "When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, and the apostles and the elders." And I think - wouldn't it just be so awesome if when we push the boundaries to include more populations of disciples if the leadership of the Evangelical Covenant Church, if they were just welcoming people that were doing that. It's not so much the case but I still am hopeful. "And they reported to these leaders, all that God had done with them. But some believers who belong to the sector the Pharisees stood up and said, it's necessary (the word could also be right and proper) for them to be circumcised, and to keep the law of Moses." It's right and proper to be circumcised, this is what makes us us they said. This is an identity question, this is what identifies us as us. Are we going to say that this thing that has been our thing is no longer our thing? The apostles and the elders they met together to consider this matter, is this thing that's been our thing no longer going to be our thing, and after there had been much debate Peter stood up and said: "My brothers you know that in the early days, God made a choice among you, that I should be the one, through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers." Then he retells the story of Peter and Cornelius which you have heard, and he says and God knows the human heart and testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just like he did to us. And in cleansing their heart by faith, he made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test. By placing on the neck of the disciples, a yoke that neither our ancestors, or we even can bear. Peter says this yoke of the law has been too much Come on, y'all. You know the law has placed us under the burden of commandments, we cannot keep and curses that we deserve for our disobedience and the crushing weight of this yoke of circumcision is the obligation to obey the whole law.

Because you see it seems that some of the Jews had snuck in among all these Gentile converts and told them they only needed to be circumcised. One small little thing was all that was required and Peter is calling that out as a false. He says no way - this is a gateway law. You start with this one and pretty soon you have to do all of them. He says if you want them to become Jewish before they become followers of Jesus circumcision is not the only requirement. Don't lie to them, there are hundreds of laws they are going to have to follow. And you all know this has been a burden to us as well. Besides, as the followers of Christ, this is actually not what we believe. Verse 11. "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as

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they will.” Don't miss this. “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Don't miss this, Pastor Scott has made this clear in the previous messages and it's important that you see the pattern here, Peter is proclaiming that the inclusion of the Gentiles is not just a gift to the Gentiles (ooo doing them a favor!), but that God is using the witness of the Gentiles to teach the Jews that the familiar fulfillment of the law is no longer necessary. We believe it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are. Well I never would have believed it, but the *arelim* are teaching us such a thing! And if God gave them the spirit without them fulfilling the law, then God can give us the spirit without our fulfilling the law. If God can cleanse their heart by faith and not by works, then God can cleanse our hearts by faith and not by works. People of God, do you think we are blessing them by allowing them to join us? No, he says, they are blessing us through their witness teaching us something about God that we didn't know - perhaps we never would have known - if we had not entered into relationship with them. We thought we were going to usher them in, only to find that they were ushering us in. Because we now see that we can be as free as they are.

The whole assembly kept silence. And then listened to Barnabas and Paul, as they told them of all the signs and wonders that God had done with them among the Gentiles. This is important because this is the affirmation that this pattern is not isolated, what Peter witnessed. We are also witnessing, they say, what Artisan is witnessing is being witnessed all over the place. That indeed, God's love and freedom is more expansive than we previously believed. It says after they finished speaking James replied: “My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably upon the Gentiles to take from among them a people of his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets. As it is written: After this I will return and I'll rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen and from its ruins, I will rebuild it. And I will set it up so that all other people may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles, over whom my name has been called, thus says the Lord who has been making these things known from long ago.” James says this experience is confirmed by the trajectory of Scripture, and for what it's worth, James' argument is not that God is doing a new thing out of the blue, but rather God is doing what God has always said God is doing, showing mercy and creating people for God's self where no people existed before. “Therefore I reached the decision (says James) that we should not trouble. We should not make it difficult for those Gentiles who are turning to God.”

Why, why would we ever want to make it difficult for a population of people to become disciples? Why? It is not just or caring to make it more difficult for a certain population of people to become disciples and for others to have to have it be hard. Do not make it hard for them. Because following Jesus is hard enough without adding anything. And now don't get me

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wrong, Jesus is better news than I have ever received, but following Jesus - really following Jesus - it's hard enough once you start doing it let's not make it hard to begin. Verse 20 says this: "But we should write them and tell them to abstain only from things polluted by idols, and from fornication, and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city for generations past Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues." Okay, I have to admit that this little follow up is a little bit maddening to me, because it's like let's don't make it difficult, but.... Man religious people love to like - oh we're not being difficult, but.... Here's what I think is happening here. This whole conversation is about identity. How will people know who we are, how will we know who we are? Circumcision was our thing and we can let that go. But let's be identifiable by being different than our culture in some way. And so the decision is to abstain from things that are attached to idol worship, and the things listed are all a part of that. Eating meat with blood in it, eating animals that were strangled and sacrifice, fornication in front of idols. Let's not be attached to idol worship. In this way, people will know that we don't worship idols and that we worship Jesus as our Lord.

Now the majority of theologians do not believe that this particular list was meant to be a binding theological statement for Christians for all time. It was a statement in that time for that people to be able to say, well, how could we in this culture right now be identified, but similar to not getting circumcised, I suppose, I mean, we haven't held on to that, I mean I won't ask for a show of hands, but we get circumcised now and the scripture clearly says we shouldn't. And we eat meat and we clearly do. And so none of these things have remained identifiers for Christians over the long haul. In fact quite quickly the early church transitions from these customs that were the discerned position at an official Council, as their identifiers, and in fact within a matter of years, the apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome: "Some believe in eating anything while others eat vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat. God has welcomed everybody." He even makes the Sabbath negotiable: "Some judge one day better than another while others judge all day as alike, let's be fully convinced of our own selves."

Very soon in the life of the early church, the identifying feature of those who are followers of Jesus was not circumcision, Nor was it what they abstained from, but rather it became what they engaged in. "Owe nothing to anyone." It says in Romans, "except to love one another for the one who loves another has fulfilled the whole law." Or from our opening text this morning "For freedom Christ has set us free stand therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." Listen I Paul, I'm telling you that if you let yourself be circumcised Christ will be of no benefit to you. "Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised, that he's

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obliged to fulfill the whole law. You, you want to to be justified by the law, have cut yourself off from Christ, you have fallen away from grace, but for through the Spirit by faith we eagerly await for the hope of righteousness, for in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision or uncircumcision counts for anything. The only thing that counts is faith, working through love.” The only thing that counts.

And I want us to take note here that the early church’s discerned position evolved as they listened to the Spirit, as they joined God and God's mission to make more disciples and more populations in a more caring and just world. It seems they became aware that retaining certain convictions and theologies would become an obstacle for certain populations of people and so they followed the pattern of the Jerusalem Council over and over again, and continuously made the decision that we will not make it difficult for those Gentiles who are turning to God. It won't be that we have no standards, as some people say, but because we believe that love fulfills the law, our standard will be faith, working itself out in love. The only thing that will count is faith, working itself out through love. And this is better news, but it's harder work than the law, and I want to be clear about this because those who raise up the law as the highest standard often paint those who are questioning aspects of it as either lazy or trying to get out of it, trying to get out of the high cost of devotion to God. Oh you just want grace so you don't have to do anything! And I want to testify that following the law was way easier and cost me far less than holding my faith to the standard of working itself out through love. My friends, following the law is often way easier, and will cost you far less than holding your faith to the standard of working itself out through love.

The law, in many ways, is easy. It's prescribed and followable without much effort. Just do this and don't do that. And our brains love patterns and routines, because they save us so much biological energy, and having to make decisions all the time about how faith is going to work itself out in love was hugely inefficient for your brain. It requires so much energy. Heck, choosing what's for dinner every night has been so stressful and exhausting during the pandemic, never getting to go out and having somebody else pick their own stuff! Stepping into a spiritual life that is guided by the Spirit rather than the law, it's like having to decide what's for dinner all day, every day. Discerning how our faith is going to work itself out through love, it takes time and energy that the law simply does not, which means we will always - at a biological level - be drawn back to the law. Getting our faith back into a pattern that we can just repeat pass on, universalize and enforce. You can label this as sin if you want, but it really is just our biological system working the way it was designed to preserve energy. And no matter how you label the tendency, you need to be aware of it and so do I. Because even though we don't have

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to fight to be free - Christ has set us free already - we have to fight not to be enslaved again. We will have to work to keep our faith, working itself out in love, rather than the law.

And I want to close with just two ways that I believe we can keep at this work. Undoubtedly, there are so many, but I want to start with just these two. The first is this: this work of love requires that we let go of our reliance on the formula that our performance is what gains us the love of God. In his letter to the Galatians, which was written not long after the Council of Jerusalem, the apostle Paul writes to the church there: Church, you have started off free, but now you're reverting to circumcision. If you add in circumcision, he says, you might as well cut the whole thing off, it is what he says. If you add any little bit of law back into the equation, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Christ will be of no value, because in essence we will be saying that who we are and what we have done has more value than who Christ is and what Christ has done. If you start to trust in circumcision to gain God's blessing, then you have stopped trusting in the free gift of God's grace. Paul makes it very clear that if we trust in our own efforts to keep the law, then we are no longer trusting in God. It is circumcision or Christ for Paul, it is law or grace. These are exclusive alternatives. You cannot have it both ways. We have to choose. Paul says we cannot even include a foreskin of the law - I said it - as a requirement for the full inclusion and God's blessing! You know how tiny, the foreskin of an eight day old male child is, but he says not even that tiny littlest thing. This is the work of love: to trust God's love for us, without any evidence that we've earned it.

I'm telling you, this is far more difficult than to come to God with the list of all this stuff I've done and all the laws I followed. To trust that God loves me without that... man it's work to remember that in Galatians Paul's warnings are to those who are already getting circumcised. The present tense in the Greek indicates the processes already beginning that these new converts are getting circumcised, and Paul wants to stop the slash of the knife. The Christian process of circumcision began a long time ago, in the church we are well under the knife, trying to be justified by the law. In other words, trying to gain God's approval by doing this thing or following that law, saying this prayer, be baptized, have correct interpretation orthodox belief. I mean the list is super long, it used to be like no lipstick, don't curl your hair, don't wear a dress above your knee. I mean the list gets long and over and over again. For the Jewish Christians, ending the necessity of circumcision meant that followers of Jesus, we're going to have to trust that without any physical witness they were still included. To trust that we are included because Jesus says we are. Period. The struggle to let go of external metrics - it never ends. It is part of our own inability to accept a free gift. It's hard work. It's hard work to keep believing that we are one of God's favorites, just like everybody else. Especially when some days I don't even like myself. So then I settle for some sort of metric, something I can measure to assure myself... But I

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want to proclaim over all of us again this morning: We are all God's favorites. None of us loved more, and none of us loved less. No matter our list completed or our laws fulfilled, period. Faith working itself out in love means that we... We do the work of receiving love as a free gift, rather than as a reward for our behavior.

The second thing. Faith working itself out in love means that we offer love as a free gift to the whole world. Love rather than the law is going to guide our interaction with everybody, and this is way more work than the law. I want you just to think about the story of the Good Samaritan. The guy is wounded on the side of the road, and the priest and the Levite, two religious people, they walk by the man who has been beaten and left for dead, and the law grants them permission to pass by. They are too unclean or profane for the holy set apart people to touch. This is allowed by law, not to get their hands dirty. And the reason I'm telling you this, and that faith working itself out in love is better news but harder work, is that if the law doesn't govern the situation and prescribe the behavior required, each and every follower of Jesus, all of us has to learn to listen to the Spirit of God for how the Spirit is inviting us to respond. All the time. And this is better news for the world, but it is more work for us, because we are all going to come across people who have been beaten down by life, who are in need of a hand up every single day, and faith working itself out in love means that if we're going to be the ones who consistently show mercy, we're going to have to be listening for the Spirit's nudging at all times. To go across the road, even to those whom we previously called a pejorative, even when - perhaps maybe especially when - the letter of the law would grant us a pass.

Faith working itself out and love means that we receive love as a free gift, rather than a reward. And faith working itself out in love means we offer love as a free gift to the world, as a witness that we understand that everyone is God's favorite. And so we want to tear down every obstacle that would make it difficult for people to believe in such a thing. Artisan church, I want to affirm that you want to join God in God's mission to see more disciples and more populations in a more caring and just world, in throwing your doors wide open as your faith works itself out in love. May you find, as the early church found, that you are transformed, that you find yourself more free, and that you become ever more confident that you too are one of God's favorites, just like everybody else. I know Pastor Scott has been offering a specific call at the end of each of his messages, and I want to do the same today. Whether you're on Zoom or, or Facebook Live or you're in the congregation today I want to offer this invitation. If you have never heard that you are one of God's favorites, that you are loved with an everlasting love, regardless of what you have done or haven't done, but simply because God can't help God's self but love you, I want to invite you to open yourself up to the possibility today that you are God's favorite. I want you to open yourself up, if you want, to the possibility that God might reveal

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today through God's Spirit that you are a favorite. And if you are someone who has known in theory that God has loved you, but in practice, you've been all about circumcision, I pray today that you would cease and desist your constant practice of tallying up points. Aren't you tired? And perhaps lean back and take a deep breath and receive the free gift of God's grace. And for Artisan and for all the churches that are represented on Zoom and Facebook today: May we become a people who do not make it difficult for anyone to find themselves fully included. May we become the people whose identity is known for working itself out through love. May it be so. In Jesus name. Amen.

Wow. God, I'm so glad that you were with us today. My goodness. Let's take communion. I hope that you got some communion on the way and if you're in the room with us I hope you have something with you that's sort of like bread and wine, whether you are at home or wherever you're worshipping with us today, I encourage you to take that bread. And remember that God loves you so much, God put on human flesh, and dwelt among us, and sacrificed that very body out of love for you. You can take and break that bread in remembrance of Christ's body, which is broken for you, and receive it now. Perhaps thinking of your need for forgiveness and for love and sacrifice, or perhaps thinking of God's call for you to offer your own self as a sacrifice in love. Take the cup, and remember that Jesus spilled his very blood for the forgiveness of sins. Yours and mine and those of the whole world. May this be for you the real presence of Christ our Savior. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).