

Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies

Galatians

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2016

The Epistle to the Galatians: What is the Gospel?

Chapter 1 – “A Different Gospel”

The apostle Paul is writing to a group of churches that he helped establish. His concern is over nothing less than the content of the gospel itself. The gospel was being perverted. Instead of being a message of grace, God’s unearned gift of goodness and mercy, it had degenerated into a human achievement based on the requirements of the Law of Moses. This was a different gospel that was, in fact, no gospel at all.

I. Human Approval or God’s Approval? – 1:1-10

Paul’s greeting is itself a testimony of faith. He is writing to a group of churches in the Roman province of Galatia which included several cities which Paul had visited and where he had planted churches such as Antioch, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 13-14). Paul then in this epistle is not dealing with only a local problem. The serious issue he was confronting had affected a number of early Christian churches. The stakes were high. If “a different gospel” was being followed Paul’s work would have basically been in vain.

Paul’s opening statement summarizes the gospel. Jesus in his death on the cross “gave himself for our sins” (v. 4). The purpose of this was to “free us from the present evil age.” All of this was “according to the will of our God and Father to whom be the glory forever and ever.” Several key themes are touched upon in this brief opening statement. They include sin, salvation, freedom and God’s glory. Each of these is an essential part of Paul’s gospel message. At the same time each of them has been distorted by the presence of the “different gospel” which was doing nothing less than a perversion of the gospel of Christ. This is not a matter of a different perspective or interpretation. The issue for Paul here is the very integrity of the gospel itself.

After this brief opening Paul gets down to the serious business at hand. He expresses his “one who had called astonishment that these churches had turned from the “one who called you in the grace of Christ.” That one can be none other than God the Father (II Cor. 5:19). Paul’s concern is that the Galatians have turned to a “different gospel.” He quickly adds that there is no such thing. There is one gospel which Paul summarizes in a variety of ways such as Romans 5:8:

“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Salvation is a gift from God received by grace (God’s unearned love and mercy) through faith. There are no works that we can do to contribute to this. This grace should result in our doing good works. However, these would be expressions of gratitude not requirements which we would have to follow (Ephesians 2:1-10).

As wonderful as the gospel is, it is rejected and distorted again and again. The free gift of salvation is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (I Cor. 1:23). We are called to believe this gift and receive it (Rom. 10:9). God alone sets the limits to his grace (Rom. 9:16). In this grace Paul states that God ultimately will be merciful to all (Rom. 11:25-32). To this day people struggle, resist and distort this gospel. Why is this? It goes back to the very nature of sin itself which is our desire to be like God (Gen. 3:4-5).

God’s first lesson in mercy was his giving the law to Moses (Ex. 25:22 33:19). But Israel was never capable of keeping the law (Romans 3-4). Yet always God’s grace was greater than Israel’s sin (Jer. 51:5; Hosea 11:8-9; Rom. 5:12-21). Jesus came to fulfill the law. This fulfillment was the law of love, not commands (Matt. 22:34-40). Faith was not a matter of ritual or requirements but of God’s mercy (Matt. 9:13).

Although the gospel is foretold in the Old Testament, it was not until the coming of Christ that it could be fully known. Yet the world and even Jesus’ own disciples have resisted this “good news of great joy for all people” from the first Christmas up till now. The devil has fought against it with all his might (Eph. 6:10-17). Nowhere in the New Testament is the distinction between the true gospel and the “different gospel” clearer than it is in Galatians. Martin Luther summarized all this by saying,

“Therefore if the Gospel is a gift and offers a gift, it does not demand anything. On the other hand, the Law does not grant anything; it makes demands on us, and impossible ones at that.”

Paul emphasizes that his reception of the gospel did not come from any human source. He received it as a revelation from Jesus Christ. He was convinced that God had called him in grace even before he was born. In no way was he seeking human approval. Paul waited seventeen years before he began his missionary career. His call was not only to proclaim the gospel but to defend it.

II. The Marks of a Different Gospel

- a. The false gospel of magic – Deut. 4:19; Acts 13:4-12
- b. The false gospel of Law – Matt. 12:1-12; Acts 15:1-11; Rom. 3:21-31; 14; Col. 2:16-17
- c. The false gospel of spiritual experience – I Cor. 14:1-5; Col. 2:18-19

Questions for Discussion –

1. Since the gospel is a message of joy and mercy, why do we resist it so much?
2. Why do we so often assume that our salvation depends on our doing something – the Law, good works, religious practices or whatever?
3. What are examples of a “different gospel” in today’s world?

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Chapter 2 – “Paul vs. Peter”

This is a monumental chapter in the New Testament. What we have here is one of the clearest statements of the most destructive and ongoing heresy in the history of the Christian Church. On the positive side, Paul presents us with his essential view that the gospel represents freedom. This freedom finally is freedom from the law. This was a difficult concept in Paul's time and it still is for us today.

I. Paul's Trip to Jerusalem – The Council (Acts 15) – Gal. 2:1-10

Paul speaks of a trip he made to Jerusalem with Barnabas fourteen years after his initial visit. That fourteen years would cover time he spent in his native city of Tarsus (Acts 9:30) leading up to his initial partnership with Barnabas (Acts 11:25-26). To get some sense of the chronology it was around this time that the reigning Herod died (44 A.D.). Paul probably spent close to a decade in Tarsus preparing himself to answer God's call to be the apostle to the Gentiles. As Daniel and his three friends mastered the beliefs and culture of Babylon Paul did the same with his Greek speaking world (Acts 17:22-28).

The crisis in the early church which continues to this day was the “different gospel” which the Pharisees in the church presented. Their view was that faith in Christ alone was not sufficient for salvation. To believe in Christ was to believe in the Messiah as the final expression of the Law of Moses. Therefore, it was necessary to keep the Law in order to be saved. The symbol of this for all Gentile males was the rite of circumcision which the Pharisees would have maintained went all the way back to Moses (Acts 15:1-5). These would probably have been the “false believers secretly brought in” (by whom? We are not told) to spy on the freedom we have in Christ.

Paul's radical view of this freedom in Christ can be summarized in the following texts:

1. “The only thing that counts is faith active in love” – Gal. 5:6
2. “nothing is impure in itself” – Rom. 14:14
3. “‘Everything is permissible’ but not everything is beneficial’ – I Cor. 10:23

4. "Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience" – I Cor. 10:25
5. "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected provided it is received with thanksgiving." – I Tim. 4:4
6. "To the pure all things are pure" – Titus 1:15
7. "love is the fulfilling of the law" – Rom. 13:10

Paul asserts his independence. The other leaders "contributed nothing" to him (2:6). This is not a statement of pride or boasting. Paul had received a revelation directly from Jesus himself (1:12). He also speaks of having been welcomed by the other leaders, Peter, James and John.

Paul would maintain that the gospel of God's free grace was not new. The Old Testament provided ample testimony that Israel was never able to keep the Law (II Kings 21:14-15). The prophets introduce this concept of radical grace (Jer. 30-31; 51:5; Lamentations 3; Isa. 40-66; Hosea). Paul will expound further on his view of the role of the Law. Suffice to say that it was an intermediate but necessary stage in God's plan of salvation. Peter himself says as much at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6-11).

Paul is convinced he is clarifying the gospel message not creating something new. The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus emphasizing the continuing role of the Law (Matt. 5:17-20). Yet what is that role? Paul would maintain that Matthew presents the same message that he is stating. For Matthew it is not the letter of the Law but the Law as a prelude to grace that is central:

1. Do not judge – Matt. 7:1
2. Jesus is a friend of tax collectors and sinners – Matt. 11:19
3. The Sabbath was made for humanity – Matt. 12:1-14
4. What makes a person "unclean?" – Matt. 15:10-20
5. The impossibility of humans to save themselves – Matt. 19:16-26
6. The summary of the Law – Matt. 22:34-40

Paul is also at one with the Old Testament and the Jerusalem leaders regarding the care of the poor. He states that he was eager to do this.

II. Peter Comes to Antioch – Gal. 2:11-21

Yet legalism dies hard. Peter came to Antioch which included a number of Gentile Christians. Following the impact of his vision from the Lord he realized two essential truths. First, the Law was no longer binding (for the Jewish community of this time there was no basis to separate the ritual aspects of the Law from the moral commandments. Jesus himself made no such separation (John 8:1-11). Second there could be no wall of separation between people, men and women, Gentile and Jew, slave or free, sinner or righteous (Gal. 3:28).

Peter understood this and ate with the Gentiles in Antioch. However, when some of the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem came to visit, Peter, fearing criticism possibly (Acts 11:2-3) stopped eating with the Gentile believers. Other Jewish Christians followed his example (2:12-13). This even included Barnabas! For Peter, Barnabas and the other Jews their whole life experience and culture had been based on maintaining these distinctions.

Paul, however, will have none of it. Such behavior was undermining the gospel. Paul then proceeds to criticize Peter publically saying that he and the others were not “acting consistently with the truth of the gospel” (2:13). Paul then launches into a summary of the critical aspect of the gospel. We are justified by faith in Christ not by doing the works of the Law. Paul is not denying the life of faith under the authority of Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1-2). However, that can never be reduced to a law of any kind. Paul’s emphasis is unmistakable. He died to the Law so that he could live in Christ and Christ could live in him (2:19-20). Paul could not be clearer: “for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing”!!! (2:21).

Legalism in one form or another has been the continuing heresy of the Christian Church. It leads either to spiritual pride or despair. Throughout history, major theologians – Augustine, Martin Luther, Karl Barth – have called the church back to the gospel of free grace only to see the church return to some form of legalism: “to be a Christian you must have faith in Jesus Christ **and**” Whatever is added destroys the gospel. Paul’s words confront us today. It is either the law or Christ. We cannot serve both (Matt. 6:24).

Questions for Us –

1. Why do you think Peter turns back from eating with the Gentiles? What would be an example of that today?
2. What is the continuing appeal of legalism in the church?
3. Some Biblical scholars have recently stated that the church’s blanket rejection of homosexuality is a modern form of legalism? What do you think?

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Chapter 3 – “Foolish Galatians”

Paul now expands on what he had just written to the Galatians. He calls them foolish because they were turning to the law rather than depending of faith apart from the works of the law (Rom. 3:28). He presents the example of Abraham. Abraham believed in God's promise and was regarded as righteous more than four hundred years before the giving of the law. The law played a necessary but temporary role in defining the problem of sin. However, with the coming of Christ that role is over.

III. Paul's Frustration with the Galatians – 3:1-18

Paul is finding he has to repeat himself. He calls the Galatians “foolish” because, having once received the gospel of justification by faith, they were turning back to the requirements of the law. For Paul this means they have left the power of the Holy Spirit and have gone back to depending on “the flesh,” in other words depending on their own efforts.

The Galatians have gotten things backward. The law was given to Israel to, in effect, introduce them to the Lord (Ex. 20:1-2). The law identified the problem of sin, as well as its consequences. The law sought to restrain the full impact of sin. Yet even in this it failed, not because the law wasn't “holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:12), but because of humanity's sinful nature. As we have noted, the record of Israel under the law is a painful and tragic one. Israel continually failed to keep the law. Even David, the man after God's own heart (I Sam. 13:14), committed grievous sins and plunged his own family into a distressing record of rape, betrayal and murder.

The law is neither the focus nor the substance of God's plan for all humanity. In calling Israel, God never intended that Israel alone would be his people. Four hundred and thirty years before the law God gave a promise to Abraham (v. 17). That promise had two key elements to it. First, the promise was a gift. Abraham received it by faith not by performing any works which in any way could earn God's favor. Second, the promise included the Gentiles: “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you” (Gal. 3:8). The fact is the law, with its stringent demands, is the very opposite of a promise. In fact, the law places a curse on anyone who does not obey everything written in it (v. 10; Deut. 27:26); Lev. 184-5). Paul reiterates his fundamental point that no one can live by the “works of the law.” To the contrary, as he quoted in Romans, “The one who is righteous will live by faith” (v. 11; Rom. 1:17; Habakkuk 2:4). Through believing in Christ, we become descendants of Abraham. We inherit the promise God made to Abraham. In

reality Abraham only has one true descendant. That is Jesus Christ. We share in the promise to Abraham through him.

Paul will now make another shocking statement. Jesus was sinless and was the only person who ever lived who followed the law in its true (not literal) sense. Still, even he was cursed by the law. Deut. 21:23 states that “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (v. 13). This would apply to the cross. Even more to the point, Jesus on the cross is made sin for us (II Cor. 5:21). Paul here is essentially espousing what he said earlier in his statement that “if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (2:21).

IV. “Why then the Law?” – 3:19-29

Paul now addresses the role of the law in more depth. The law was temporary not permanent. It was not opposed to the promises of God. We need to remember that the “law” for Paul was the five books of Moses, the Torah. These contain more than legal demands. They include the provision for the forgiveness of sins. They address the priority of the heart which truly fulfills the law (Deut. 10:12-16). Yet nothing in the law could make a person righteous or acceptable to God. Sin was too powerful (Rom. 7:14-20).

Paul sees the role of the law as being a guard or disciplinarian until the promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ. We were in reality imprisoned by the law and its demands. Yet, in Christ we have been freed from all that. One of the major changes that comes through Christ is that everyone is now equal. We are all sinners. We all need God’s grace. We all received the promise through faith. There is then no status, no spiritual rank in Christ. The boundaries of Jew vs. Greek, slave vs. free or male vs. female have all fallen away. Wherever such boundaries exist, black vs. white, gay vs. straight, young vs. old, conservative vs. liberal, (even “good” vs. “bad” people) the gospel is not present and we invariably share in the foolishness of the Galatians.

Why is this so difficult for us? Why has the church failed to grasp this through the centuries? We could equally well ask, why was Israel never faithful? We yearn for security which we think we can find in the law in some way. The irony of course is that we can’t. The law can be used to justify our spiritual pride or a false sense of confidence in ourselves (Luke 18:11-12). Yet the law can just as easily lead us to despair since it can never take away our sin (Rom. 7:9-11). Jesus breaks down all the barriers when he says the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into heaven ahead of the religious leaders. The reason is that the tax collectors and prostitutes believed and the leaders did not (Matt. 21:28-32).

Paul does not dismiss the reality of sin nor does he excuse it. However, the gospel creates an entirely different reality for us. We are free to show love in a

completely open way (Rom. 13:8-10). Yet we, like the Galatians, want some concrete standards to follow. Paul will not give them to us.

A word should be said here about the discussion on Abraham in the Epistle of James (James 2:14-26). At first glance it can seem that James is contradicting Paul when he says that a person “is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). Yet James and Paul are talking about two different things. Paul is talking about the law. James is not saying that we have to keep the law. He is saying that faith should make a difference in our lives. Faith, if it is genuine, should lead us to do good works. James says that we show our faith by our works (James 2:18). Faith doesn’t simply assent to God’s promises. Faith does indeed make us righteous, not in our strength but through a trust in God that is more than a matter of words (James 2:14-15). As Paul will say later in Galatians the work of the Spirit should be visible in our lives, not as a new law, but as an intention to follow the Lord (Gal. 5:22-26). James says that faith without works is dead (James 2:26). Paul would agree with him.

Questions for Us –

1. Why do you think requiring “works of the law” is the oldest and most persistent heresy in the Christian faith?
2. What is the difference between “works of the law” and “good works” (Eph. 2:10)?
3. Why are we so tempted to make divisions like Jew vs. Greek, male vs. female, etc.

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Chapter 4 – “No Longer Slaves!”

Paul seems baffled by the attitude of the Galatians. It seems to him that they are almost afraid to live out the freedom they have in Christ. Paul equates their background in paganism, worshipping the “elemental spirits of the world” to a dependence on the Law. The Galatians are heirs of God in Christ not slaves. Yet they are living as though they want to surrender their freedom and return to some forms of the Law. This issue has been a major problem for Christians throughout the ages.

V. “How Can You Turn Back?” – 4:1-20

Paul is having trouble making sense of the Galatians. He uses the example of children who are heirs of a special inheritance. When children are under age their status can be similar to that of a slave. They are not allowed to act on their own. They don't have freedom. They have to serve their master which in the case of children are their parents. In the case of a slave they remain in their dependent status their whole life. This however is not the case with the heirs. They grow into freedom and become their own guardians.

There are several things here that Paul's opponents, the Pharisee Christians (Acts 15:1-11) or, as he calls them in II Corinthians, the “super-apostles” (II Cor. 11:5) would have had difficulty accepting. First, Paul warns the Galatians about their previous worship of “elemental spirits.” These could well have been the false gods of the Greco-Roman world (Acts 14:8-18). Yet Paul clearly states that the Law of Moses fits into this category. Paul's opponents would, no doubt, have asked him how he could identify pagan gods with the true God of Moses.

Paul obviously is not identifying the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with Zeus or any other false gods. However, he is saying that the relationship one has to both of these can be the same. To depend on either of these is to deny the freedom we have in Christ. It is to opt for the position of a slave rather than that of an heir, a minor instead of an adult. In Christ Paul says we have been adopted into God's family. Why would we want to exchange the status of an heir for that of a slave? When Christ came “in the fullness of time,” everything changed. This was as true of the Gentiles as it was of the Jews. The Jews clearly have the advantage of having had the Old Testament (Rom. 3:1-4). Yet if they reject Christ they end up having a zeal that is not enlightened (Rom. 10:2). Paul's opponents would maintain that they were not rejecting Christ. Quite to the contrary, they were claiming Christ as the Messiah, the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel. Paul would contend, however, that by insisting on following the Law, they were not really following Christ.

This is a striking claim. Paul in effect seems to be saying that to insist on following the Law once Christ has come, is no different than following an idol. He doesn't elaborate on the special days, months and seasons he mentions. Presumably these would have been the special days required in the Law (Passover, Day of Atonement, etc.). There would be nothing wrong presumably with observing special days and seasons (Christmas, Easter, etc.). The problem comes in if these become mandatory. They cannot be made into requirements. Apparently this was the case in some of the Galatian churches. This is why Paul goes so far as to make the extreme statement that his work with them may have been wasted (v. 11).

Paul then addresses them very personally. He speaks of the fact that he first came to them "because of a physical infirmity." Some commentators think Paul suffered from an eye ailment. He states that they would have torn their eyes for him (v. 15). Later he speaks of the "large letters," with which he writes (6:11). Paul speaks of the Galatians as his "little children" (v. 19). He is perplexed by them. They have been given this freedom in Christ but now are turning back to the Law. Paul sees this as a denial of the gospel.

VI. Children of the Promise – 4:21-31

Paul comes up with an illustration that would have at the very least surprised his opponents. He has already invoked the example of Abraham whom he pointed out had lived four hundred and thirty years before the giving of the law (3:17). He refers to the two children of Abraham. His first child, Ishmael was the son of the servant girl, Hagar. However, the child of promise was Isaac whose mother was Abraham's wife, Sarah. Paul goes on to say that the two women are an allegory representing two covenants. Hagar represents Mount Sinai and the giving of the law. She also represents the present unbelieving Jerusalem. However, Sarah represents the Jerusalem above (v. 26). She represents the freedom which Isaiah speaks of in the quote Paul includes (v. 27; Isa. 54:1). Paul's opponents would have thought that he had his example backwards. For them, certainly Sarah would have represented Mount Sinai, faithful Israel and the giving of the law. Hagar and Ishmael would have nothing to do with their view of the law.

For Paul, however, the issue is not the law. It is the freedom we have in Christ. Anything that tries to remove that freedom is a "different gospel," whether it is the worship of "elemental spirits" or the Law of Moses. For Paul then Hagar represents any and all attempts to come to God through works, human efforts or religious practices. All of these things finally bind and limit us. Over against that, he sets the example of Isaac as a child of promise. For Paul the promise is an inheritance which by its very nature cannot be earned, achieved or merited. A promise with strings attached is not a real promise in his mind.

When Paul says "we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman (4:31). The critical point here is that any attempt to devalue the freedom we have in

Christ is a betrayal of the gospel. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount clarifies the fact that the Law is only provisional. The life in the Spirit is much more. However, that life cannot be regulated or defined by any set of rules. Paul's concern here is not only with the Law but with any attempt to limit the freedom in Christ. As the great New Testament scholar of the last century, F.F. Bruce, put it:

“To try and keep the desires of the flesh in check by submitting to a strict discipline of rules and regulations is only an alternative way of bondage.”

This year we will be celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, like Augustine before him, reformed the church with this teaching, but yet to this day many churches and individual Christians have not fully accepted Paul's teaching here. Legalism in any form, whether it has to do with circumcision, divorce, homosexuality or whatever, finally denies the gospel according to Paul. The objection arises, if we have no concrete rules of conduct for Christians then won't people indulge themselves and live lives that are not only undisciplined but sinful. Don't we need some kind of code of Christian conduct?

Paul will answer those questions in chapter 5.

Questions for Us –

1. What do you think is the Galatians' attraction to the Law? Are they afraid of the freedom Paul describes? Are we?
2. What is the difference between a child-like faith and being childish?
3. What do you think is the relationship of freedom to forgiveness?

Chapter 5 – “Firm in Freedom”

Paul is elaborating on his concern for the Galatians. The essence of the gospel is freedom. Any attempt to bring in the Law, or any part of the Law, is a denial of the gospel itself. The idea that the Law will keep people from sinning is simply not true (II Kings 21:15; Rom. 7:7-25). The Christian life is a matter of “faith working through love” (v. 6). The love that comes from Christ and is a gift of the Holy Spirit cannot be used to justify self-indulgence.

I. “Called to Freedom” – 5:1-15

Paul cannot be more emphatic. If the Law of Moses or any part of it is presented as being essential for salvation, then “Christ will be of no benefit.” It would appear that the position of the Pharisee Christians might have modified a bit since the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). There the emphasis seems to have been on a requirement for Gentile, as well as Jewish, Christians to keep the whole Law (Acts 15:5). It appears that what the Galatians had been told was that they didn’t necessarily have to keep the whole Law. They did however have to observe the requirement of circumcision. This was the defining mark of the people of God going all the way back to Abraham as we have seen. The Pharisees could insist that his was an everlasting sign (Gen. 17:13). This however was an example of their completely literal approach to the Law. Paul would insist that Christ is our circumcision. Even the Law itself spoke of circumcision being a matter of the heart. The Law was not now (nor had it ever been) the sole authority for the people of God. God, for example, spoke through the prophets (Jer. 1:4).

For Paul there is no middle ground. Salvation is all of grace through faith in Christ or it is nothing. Paul would not object to circumcision as a choice. However, it could never be made a command. Paul is clear that the “only thing that counts is faith working through love”. Love will do no harm to the neighbor (Rom. 13:10). For Paul the Law is both fulfilled in Christ and set aside by him (Col. 2:13-14). This is the double meaning of Paul’s statement that Christ is the end (goal) of the Law (Rom. 10:4). For Paul if we are under the Law the offense of the cross has been removed. What is striking about Christ’s death is that the Law has been both fulfilled and set aside. According to Paul, to insist on any part of the Law as a requirement means nothing less than cutting yourself off from Christ. Paul goes so far to say that those emphasizing circumcision should castrate themselves! This is the equivalent of an expression we would never use in church.

This teaching has been difficult for Christians throughout history (John 6:60). The Pharisee position has been replicated by Christians picking up a particular aspect or even inference of the Law and making it the identifying mark of what it means to be a Christian. This list includes pacifism, slavery (for or against), alcohol, women in ministry, spiritual gifts, divorce, abortion, homosexuality and sex in general. All of these are valid concerns. However, when any of them become divorced from the freedom we have in Christ they become a punishing and inflexible law. Faith active in love drops out.

When we return to the law we inevitably become judgmental. We fall into the trap of what Paul calls biting and devouring each other. This violates our call to freedom. It negates the love we need to have for each other.

II. The Flesh and the Spirit -5:16-26

Paul knows that his critics will insist that his strong emphasis on freedom will lead to indulgence and even immorality (this indeed had happened in the church in Corinth). Paul is certainly aware of this danger. He knows that there is a constant warfare going on in all of us between our “flesh” (our sinful nature) and the Holy Spirit which is in us by virtue of our faith in Christ. He admits that the desires of the flesh are still with us as long as we are in this earthly form. Paul’s major point is that any attempt to bring in the Law will not aid us in this conflict. In fact, the Law only makes our sinful nature worse (Rom. 7).

Paul however believes that we can and indeed must depend on the power of God’s Spirit within us. The Spirit gives us the strength to resist the demands of the flesh. Paul adds that for the Christian we do not need the Law to tell us what sin is. He says the works of the flesh are obvious. Simply put, they are expressions of total self-indulgence. His list, which he admits is not exhaustive, includes sexual indulgence, pursuing false gods (these often went together in the ancient world), conflicts based on pride or jealousy, drunkenness, carousing “and things like these”. He gives the solemn warning that “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Such behavior, certainly as a style of life, is completely alien to the life we have in Christ.

Paul will emphasize that we are free from the power of sin. We are in a struggle and we should not be discouraged when we fall. However, in Christ our desire should be to demonstrate his love. What strengthens us is the “fruit of the Spirit.” This is sometimes incorrectly referred to as “fruits.” It is not plural. This is all one fruit. It has these characteristics: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These traits not only offset the works of the flesh. They expose the false Christianity of Paul’s opponents who end up in condemnation, guilt and self-righteousness. Paul reminds us that Christ in his death freed us from the power of “the flesh with its passions and desires.” We will struggle with the desires of our sinful nature. However, we don’t have to give in to those desires. Paul’s final word is a warning about being conceited. The minute we make progress in the Christian life, the instant we turn away from a temptation, we experience an element of spiritual pride. This leads us to an attitude where we compare ourselves to others, either favorably or unfavorably. We can envy other Christians whom we can think are doing better than we are or, at least, seem to be receiving greater recognition. We need always to be guided by the Spirit to keep us from falling into these kinds of traps.

Paul next will address the issue of what do we do when we fail in our life as Christians.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What are some of the ways that we are tempted to give up our freedom in Christ?
2. How do we know when we exercising freedom or only being self-indulgent?
3. Are you experiencing the fruit of the Spirit in your life? Why or why not?

Chapter 6 – “Bear One Another’s Burdens”

Paul has no illusions about the challenge of living the Christian life. Anyone can fall. Christians need to support each other, not condemn one another. Each of us has our own role to play in Christ’s service. There is no rank or hierarchy in the church. Paul reminds the Galatians of the battle with the flesh that he mentioned in the previous chapter (5:16-17). Insisting on observing the law however does not demonstrate spirituality. In fact it only serves the pride of the flesh (Col. 2:16-23).

VII. “A Spirit of Gentleness” – 6:1-10

Paul acknowledges that there can be failures and breakdowns in the Christian community. This is the practical application of his insistence that Christians have to follow the law of love rather than the written law. A focus on the law leads to condemnation and rejection when someone is “detected in a transgression” (*The Scarlet Letter* for example). Paul maintains that we who are led by the Spirit “should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” However, this has not often been the case because the Galatian heresy of depending on the law is so widespread. Too often Christians caught in a failing (certainly as defined by the law of Moses) are subject to removal from whatever office they have and even rejection by the Christian community.

This is the opposite of what Paul advocates. Such a person is to be restored “in a spirit of gentleness.” There is a vast difference between being removed and being restored. Paul would not object to a restoration that would include discipline, counselling or other appropriate responses. Yet all this has to be done by the community bearing the burden of the person and responding in an attitude of gentleness. Too often individual Christians and the church in general respond with harshness and condemnation. What may even be worse is to cover up the indiscretion or to pretend it didn’t happen. This hardly fulfills “the law of Christ.” Jesus did not hesitate to criticize even the disciples but he always restored them (Matt. 17:17). Jesus placed a high priority on forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-22).

Paul reminds his readers that anyone of them may be tempted. We should not be quick to judge. Jesus puts it bluntly when he says let the one who is without sin cast the first stone (John 8:7). Years ago President Clinton’s lying about a sexual encounter led to his being impeached. He was roundly criticized. Yet some twenty years later it has been noted that virtually everyone involved in a leadership role in his impeachment has been found to have been guilty of some form of sexual immorality. These types of situations lead to the world seeing Christians as hypocrites.

Paul is not about to excuse sin or indulgence. There is the other extreme that tolerates and accepts everything. God is merciful. “All things are lawful” (I Cor. 6:12). Paul has already warned about the danger of using freedom as an excuse for self-indulgence (5:13). God cannot be mocked. To take the attitude that I can do whatever I want because I’m free in Christ is in effect to mock God. If we indulge our flesh we will bear

the consequences of corruption. However, if we focus on the Spirit (not the law) we will receive the benefit of eternal life. We are saved by faith. We need to live in faith. True, all of us are vulnerable. We all need support in Paul's "spirit of gentleness." At the same time, we are accountable and responsible. We can never take God's goodness and mercy for granted.

Paul concludes this section with a call for action. We are to work for the good of all, especially for those of the family of faith. Our acts of mercy, love and justice need to focus on all people. Of course Christians should support each other. However, we cannot be limited to those in our own circle. We need to "work for the good of all." We must be prepared to respond to anyone who are in need.

VIII. Final Thoughts – 6:11-18

Paul mentions the problem with his eyesight in referring to the "large letters" in his writing. In his final comments Paul reiterates his point that following the law, beginning with circumcision, is not a sign of spirituality, much less Christian faithfulness. In fact, it is the opposite. It is a sign of the flesh, our lower self-centered, sinful nature. Paul may be alluding to the fact that Christian Jews were being persecuted in synagogues when he speaks about avoiding persecution. However, this may apply to Gentile believers since it would be presumed that Jewish Christians would already have been circumcised.

Paul makes his point again that any display of following the law of Moses quickly leads to boasting (Luke 18:11). This is the irony of the law. Rather than curtailing the power of sin or the flesh, it actually leads to greater sin (Rom. 7:7-25). The law in any form leads either to despair over our failure to keep it or to spiritual pride if we can convince ourselves that we are really following it. For Paul circumcision or keeping the law is not the main issue. None of those can be a commandment or requirement. For Paul the new creation in Christ is everything (II Cor. 5:17).

What Paul has done in this epistle and in his other writings is to turn the conventional view of religion on its head. Coming to God is not a matter of human effort or intention. Still less is it based on following any sort of law or religious observances. It is all a matter of God's gift of new life given in Jesus Christ. The gospel breaks down all barriers. It is not a matter of belonging to any particular group or organization, religious or otherwise. The gospel is for all. There is no distinction, no separation. The fact that God has provided salvation for all solely by the grace (gift) received in Jesus Christ challenges us to proclaim the message. God is merciful to all (Rom. 11:32) but that mercy cannot be separated from the faith we have in Christ. Faith is broader than what we think. Christ is greater than we can imagine. In him a new creation has begun. Paul calls us to live into this new creation. We don't create it but we can certainly witness to it and invite everyone to share it.

The tragedy of the Galatians and one that has been repeated throughout the ages is that God's gift can be turned into a list of demands and requirements. When that

happens freedom disappears. The loss of that all-encompassing freedom also leads to the loss of the fruit of the Spirit. The all-embracing message of the gospel is reduced to a narrow set of restrictions. For Paul that truly is a different gospel which in fact is no gospel at all. Paul prays for peace and mercy for the Israel of God. This is the transformed and renewed Israel that Paul describes in Romans 9-11, an Israel that embraces not only Jew and Gentile but indeed everyone,

“For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (I Timothy 4:10).

Questions for Us –

1. Why do you think it is so important to restore those who have fallen “in a spirit of gentleness?”
2. Why do we often find it easy to compare ourselves to others? Why is pride so deadly?
3. Why does Paul identify religious requirements like circumcision with the “flesh” over against the Spirit?