

Walking in the Spirit

Preached on The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Sept. 5, 2021
Text: Gal. 5: 16-24

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul is admonishing the churches of Galatia to return to the Gospel. Judaizing teachers had gone among the Galatians, claiming that the Jewish law was binding upon Christians. These teachers admitted that Jesus was the Messiah, but claimed that salvation required the works of the law. They especially urged that all Gentiles be circumcised. For Paul, this was tantamount to making the work of Christ void. Since the Judaizers were also casting doubt upon his authority, Paul spends much of the first two chapters defending his authority as an apostle and his teaching as coming directly from God. The message of Galatians could be summarized by saying that God does not have two families, one under the law and one not. You enter his family by repenting, being baptized, and following Christ—period.

He makes this point several times, but the most effective thus far is in Chapter 4 where he allegorized the story of Abraham and his two sons, one by Sarah and the other by Hagar. Ishmael, the son of Hagar, represents those who are under the covenant of law; Isaac represents those under the covenant of promise. Those under the law are slaves under the law; those under the covenant of promise are under grace, and so are free. For Paul, these two orientations are not reconcilable. You cannot hedge your bets by having a foot in each camp. If you are relying—even a little—on your performance of the law as justifying you before God, you are nullifying Christ's work. Paul is not ambiguous here.

[S]tand fast therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (5: 1-4)

Just as you cannot become a citizen of a country if you agree to observe only a select few of its laws, so you cannot decide to place yourself under the Jewish Law, but only to a certain extent. For Paul, it's all or nothing.

No one on their own can fulfill the Law perfectly. We all fall short. Therefore, placing yourself under the law and attempting to justify yourself through it is to submit to a slavery from which you can never be free. Still, some had convinced the Galatians to place themselves under the law, and their attempt to attain spiritual perfection by keeping the law had ended in failure. Their churches were torn apart by conflict. In Paul's words, they were "biting and devouring each other" (v. 15). Obviously, their devotion to the law had not enabled them to be devoted to each other in love. And since they did not love each

other, they were breaking the law. Where could they find the motivation and power to resolve their conflicts and renew their love for each other?

Paul's answer is the Spirit of God. "So I say, live by the Spirit" (v. 16). The command *live by the Spirit* is the central concept in Paul's appeal. Since the Christian life begins with the Spirit (3:3; 4:6, 29), the only way to continue the Christian life is by the power of the Spirit. It is not only the source of Christian life; it is the only power to sustain it. Actually, "walk by the Spirit" would be a more literal translation of Paul's command in verse 16. The command to walk in a certain way speaks of choosing a way of life in which all its aspects are directed and transformed by the Spirit.

The Galatian believers began their Christian life by receiving the Spirit (3:2-3), but they soon turned to the law to direct their lives. They probably felt that observance of the law was the way of life that would establish their identity and guide their behavior as the people of God. By turning to observance of law, they were denying the Spirit's sufficiency to identify them as the people of God and to direct their conduct. Paul's references to the Spirit in chapters 3 and 4 assure his readers that their experience of the Spirit has clearly established their identity as the true children of Abraham and as the children of God. The Spirit is the best guarantee of Christian identity and the only sure guide for Christian behavior. It is the only source of power to love in a way that fulfills the whole law.

We become free in Christ because through the cross the curse of the law has been lifted. We no longer stand condemned. We are now able through the Spirit to fulfill our nature, increasingly moving toward our true end or *telos*. We could call this a *positive* view of freedom, in that it is a freedom *to* do something or freedom *for* some truly human activity. By walking in the Spirit, the Christian becomes free to be whom God created him or her to be. We are free from being slaves under the law to being those who obey God's law joyfully. Our freedom in Christ allows us to serve others in love. For, as Paul says in verse 14, "the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The freedom Paul is *not* advocating is the modern view of freedom which we could term *negative* freedom. This view sees freedom primarily as freedom *from* something, whether constraint, interference, or coercion. This is usually couched in terms of *rights*. No explicit reference to some human purpose or fulfilling your God-given nature is invoked in this case. We have the right to live, speak, and worship as we see fit, as long as we don't impede others from doing the same. Now, of course, arguments can be made that these rights are very important and even that they undergird a truly human life, both individually and corporately. But for now, it suffices to say that Paul is not speaking about freedom in this modern sense.

He is also not teaching that living under grace equals mere license, an opportunity for our selfish nature to have free reign. His advice is not to go with our impulses and do whatever feels right or gives us pleasure. As we have said before, our unsanctified desires cannot be our touchstone as Christians. For the desires of the flesh are opposed to those of the Spirit. Paul certainly doesn't see our untutored desires as trustworthy guides to the

abundant Christian life. The human heart is still a battleground where the impulses that flow from human selfishness seek to have their sway over us. Again, the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit. They want to place *us* at the center of things, not God and neighbor.

Paul lists some of these “works of the flesh” that keep us out of God’s Kingdom: adultery, fornication, uncleanness or impurity, wantonness or licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, uncontrolled temper, self-seeking, dissension, divisions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing. These practices lead to the degradation of those doing them as well as the degradation of others. Many of them set people at odds with others and lead their practitioners to dehumanize other people. This does the opposite of building trust and community. It certainly doesn’t strengthen the household of God. Following the flesh may hold out the promise of liberation and exaltation, but it leads finally to destruction.

What leads to life, then? The answer, again, is walking in the Spirit. To the extent that we do this, we become alive in Christ and a blessing to others. A church community of people living this way glorifies God and sheds his light upon the world. As Christians seek the Spirit’s aid in replacing negative thinking about others with love and kindness, we find our attitudes will increasingly mirror those of Christ. We begin to see others as he sees them. This happens only as we allow the ministrations of the indwelling Spirit through prayer and self-abasement. If we cooperate with the work of the Spirit, new and godly desires, thoughts, and orientations will actively dissipate and destroy the fleshly lusts. We will begin to bear new fruit, characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

This will in turn make it more natural to center the meditations of our heart upon the teachings of the Lord and therefore to have the mind of Christ. We will be more conscious of the indwelling Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Having our heart in this state will indeed “crucify” the lusts and the evil imaginations which feed them. Only in this way will we truly enjoy our freedom in Christ and become God’s people, “a holy temple in the Lord.” (Eph. 2: 21)

In the Name...