

Walking in the Spirit

Preached on Trinity 14
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Sept. 13, 2020

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul is admonishing the churches of Galatia to come back to the gospel. Outside elements are pushing another gospel. They are convincing many to observe the Jewish law, making the work of Christ void. God does not have two families, but one. You enter His family and thus the lineage of Abraham, by trusting Christ—period. There are not one set of rules for one family and another set for the other, because there is no other.

He has tried to make the 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.

With Christ, we are free. But some had convinced the Galatians to place themselves under the law. The attempt of the Galatian believers 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. The Spirit is not only the source of Christian life but also the only power to sustain Christian life. 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—or we might say a "lifestyle," as long as we realize that what Paul has in mind is more than a matter of outward style. His command speaks of a way of living in which all aspects of life 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.

But now Paul has to face another issue and this is one of the things that makes his letter to the Galatians so complicated. His argument can be fast-paced, agitated, and often at seeming odds with itself. When he declared that the end of the reign of law had come and that the reign of grace had arrived, some might take this to mean that we need not recognize any constraints on our behavior at all. For it is always possible for someone to say, "That, then, means that I can do what I like; all the restraints are lifted and I can follow my inclinations wherever they lead me. Law is gone and grace ensures forgiveness anyway." There were many in Paul's time, as through all the Christian ages, who see the gospel of grace as an invitation to self-indulgence. This is how many then and now want to understand what Paul means by the freedom found in Christ.

But the freedom Paul is talking about is a freedom that earlier ages of Christians and classical thinkers understood as a freedom to fulfill our nature and increasingly move 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. This view assumes a certain view of humans, namely, that they have a proper nature which can only be achieved by practicing certain behaviors and exercising certain virtues. For the Christian, these are outlined in the teachings of Christ and His apostles. By exercising the natural and theological virtues, the individual 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 need be invoked in this case. You have the right to live, speak, worship as you see fit, as long as you 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 contribute to a healthy human life, both individually and corporately. But that is an argument for another time. What is important for our purposes is that Paul is not speaking about freedom in this sense of inalienable rights. To think otherwise is rank anachronism.

The freedom that Paul is arguing against is antinomianism, a view that rejects law and sets itself against moral, social, or religious norms. He is 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 your impulses and do whatever feels right or gives you pleasure. 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. For 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 you at the center of things, not God and neighbor.

Paul lists some of these "works of the flesh" that keep you out of God's Kingdom: adultery, fornication, uncleanness or impurity, wantonness or licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity or hatred, strife or quarrelling, jealousy, uncontrolled temper, self-seeking, dissension, divisions, envy or an embittered mind, 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. How can the family of God survive these behaviors? 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. “[T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Let us spend some time on these.

Love. This is the Greek word *agape*, which means unconquerable benevolence. It means that no matter what a man may do to us by way of insult or injury or humiliation we will never seek anything else but his highest good. It is therefore an orientation of the mind as much as of the heart; it concerns the will as much as the emotions. It describes the deliberate effort—which we can make only with the help of God—never to seek anything but the best even for those who seek the worst for us.

Joy. The Greek word is *chara*. It is not the joy that comes from earthly things, still less from triumphing over someone else in competition. It is a joy whose foundation is God. As strange as it sounds, one can have joy even as one has a broken heart.

Peace (*eirene* in Greek). Usually in the New Testament *eirene* stands for the Hebrew *shalom* and means not just freedom from trouble but everything that makes for a person's highest good. Here it means that tranquility of heart which derives from the all-pervading consciousness that our lives are in the hands of God.

Patience. *Makrothumia* is the Greek word. Generally speaking, the word is not used of patience in regard to things or events but in regard to people. The most illuminating thing about it is that it is commonly used in the New Testament of the attitude of God towards men (Romans 2:4; Romans 9:22; 1 Timothy 1:16; 1 Peter 3:20). If God had been a man, he would have wiped out this world long ago; but he has that patience which bears with all our sinning and will not cast us off. In our dealings with our fellow men we must reproduce this loving, forbearing, forgiving, patient attitude of God towards us.

Kindness and goodness are closely related. The Greek word translated as “kindness” is *chrestotes* and could also be translated as “sweetness” or “consideration.” It can mean accommodating and comfortable. It is what is translated as “easy” when Jesus says “My yoke is easy.” The word translated as “goodness” is the biblical word *agathosune*, which does not appear in secular Greek. It is fuller and more robust than kindness and is defined as ‘virtue equipped at every point.’ It can certainly discipline and rebuke, while *chrestotes* can only help. Jesus showed *agathosune* when he cleansed the Temple and drove out those who were making it a bazaar; but he showed *chrestotes* when he was kind to the sinning woman who anointed his feet. The Christian needs that goodness which at one and the same time can be kind and strong.

Faithfulness or fidelity. This word translates *pistis*, which is common in secular Greek and means trustworthiness. It is the characteristic of the man or woman who is reliable.

Meekness or gentleness translates *praotes*. It can mean submissive to the will of God, teachable, not too proud to learn. What throws most light on its meaning, however, is that its adjectival form is used of an animal that has been tamed and brought under control. Hence, the word speaks of that self-control which Christ alone can give.

Self-control or temperance. The Greek word is *egkrateia*, which Plato uses of self-mastery. It is the spirit which has mastered its desires and its love of pleasure. It is used of the athlete's discipline of his body (1 Corinthians 9:25) and of the Christian's mastery of sex (1 Corinthians 7:9). Secular Greek uses it of the virtue of an Emperor who never lets his private interests influence the government of his people. It is the virtue which makes a man so master of himself that he is fit to be the servant of others.

These virtues can only be cultivated by those who walk in the Spirit, those who belong to Christ Jesus. The fleshly person grips the self-serving impulses tightly and believes they are key to the good life. But the Christian knows that this only leads to death. He lives in the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit equips him well on the path to true Life.

In the Name...