

Sermon by Ramon Rempel
August 13, 2017
Charleswood Mennonite Church

You foolish people! Who has bewitched you? says Paul in Galatians

The task today, insofar as it is clear to me, is to continue our summer work of trying to understand Galatians chapter 5. My particular task is to focus on the fruit of the Spirit often translated as generosity or goodness.

In Galatians, Paul is setting a high standard for how we are to act. Freedom in Christ does not mean we are free to simply act as we choose. And I am not sure that we are any better than the Galatians at putting aside the works of the flesh. Certainly, many of these works are as common in the church today as they were then.

I am reminded of something that was said in our past semi-annual meeting. Given all the uncertainty and turmoil surrounding the changes in the conference, someone reassured us with the claim that God was still in control. But, given the passage in Galatians, God's presence and the promise of the kingdom may give us cause to worry given our propensity for strife, anger, quarrels, dissensions, and factions.

In this sense, nothing much has changed in the history of the Christian church. The church in Galatia was itself troubled. But Paul has hope for them - at least he sees a way for the Galatians to recover the fruit of the spirit. So there is also a way forward for us.

Paul identifies two types of mistakes to which the Christians in Galatia were prone. First, some Galatians had mistakenly followed the "circumcision faction." These were the Christians who insisted that in order to be Christian one had to follow all of the Jewish laws. Paul was not fond of this faction. In fact, he makes an awkward joke where he wishes that those who valued circumcision so highly would castrate themselves - ironically perhaps not showing the spirit of gentleness he calls for only a few verses later.

But what is it that gets Paul so upset? What is the problem with following the Jewish Law?

In some ways, there is actually nothing wrong with following Jewish law. Paul, for instance, never stops following it himself. Furthermore, the problem is not the canard of the dichotomy between faith and works, as if belief and action could somehow be separated. The best way to see what someone believes is to watch what they do. As we've already seen, Paul has high expectations for how Christians should act. The problem is when the law becomes the defining absolute system for Christianity. Christians have something more important than the law, we have Christ.

In the passage from Galatians 2 Paul doesn't deny the importance of works, rather he denies that the works of the law are what saves or justifies a Christian. Rather the key for Paul is what he says in Gal. 2:19-20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me"

In other words, we are to be wary of any system of understanding, any earthly absolutes which place themselves above Jesus. This is what fundamentalism is. Once we have a perfect understanding of truth whether it is following a literal interpretation of the bible or in a generalized version of social justice and human rights, we no longer have any need for God, or in Paul's words "if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing."

The second error Paul addresses follows as a possible response to the first. Hearing the message of freedom in Christ from the law, one might imagine we are free to act however we choose. Is this the freedom of which Paul speaks? By no means!

Gal. 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

On a recent car trip I heard a story told by a black South African woman who had lived through apartheid but had subsequently moved to Australia. One day, she was walking her child home from school when an older woman passed by her on the sidewalk. This older woman clearly wanted to pass by the child as well but he was a little ahead on a skateboard moving slowly back and forth on the sidewalk making it difficult for anyone to pass. The older woman said nothing, but after a few moments the mother spoke angrily to her child telling him to stand aside so the woman could pass.

The child complained that he hadn't noticed anyone one behind him and the older woman hadn't said anything. But the mother was still angry. Under apartheid, she had been burdened by her absence of freedom. Now that apartheid was over and she could raise her family in freedom she wanted her child to be burdened by his abundance of freedom.

This is, I believe, similar to what Paul is saying. Freedom from the burden of law is not an invitation to do whatever we want. We are still enjoined to crucify our self-indulgent selves and show that Christ lives in us. In his words "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

But how do we sow to the Spirit and not to the flesh?

In the text read today from Galatians 5, Paul lists a number of vices and virtues. These are not personality or character traits which belong to us inherently, rather these are signs of to what we give our allegiance. So when we practice these virtues we are not earning salvation by following rules. Rather we are preparing ourselves to inherit the kingdom by letting Christ live in us.

How do we acquire these virtues? Practice and imitation.

Earlier in Galatians Paul tells the Galatians to imitate him. Of course Paul only serves as a model insofar as he represents Christ. Jesus is ultimately whom we are called to imitate. And we do so by practicing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Practice and imitation. In fact, this is perhaps the primary reason we gather together as church each week. We look for role models, like Paul, through whom we can see the light of Jesus. And, since the virtues are not rules or laws, we gather to tell stories and hear explanations of what a life engendered by these virtues is like.

But what about my specific task for today? What about specific fruit of the Spirit translated as generosity or goodness? Haven't I been speaking only generally about the book? Have I forgotten my task?

The word translated here as generosity occurs only four times in Scripture. The best understanding of the word is "the virtue of concern and interest in the welfare of others." So at issue here is not generosity of wealth but rather generosity of spirit. That Paul uses this word is not surprising given his earlier emphasis on those

in the church becoming slaves to one another and on his summary of the law as the call to love your neighbour as yourself.

Once one understands how Paul uses the word generosity, one immediately sees a link to all of the fruits of the Spirit. All appear aimed away from the self and towards the other. This should not be surprising since Galatians 5 says not “fruits of the Spirit” but rather “fruit,” singular. This implies that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control name not independent things but instead are all connected.

To recap: the fundamentalist approach of law following - prominent then and today both among certain forms of evangelicalism and left wing activism - is flawed in that it is too sure of itself. (I am unsure which of evangelicals or left wing activists are more guilty of this).

But understanding Christianity’s gift of freedom as licence to pursue one’s self indulgent desires is also flawed. In effect, both errors are ones of idolatry. In the case of fundamentalism, we make an idol out of our system of understanding. And those who live by the desires of self-indulgence make an idol out of themselves.

We are left with the difficult challenge of being Christian where we cannot completely trust our understanding nor ourselves. But this is why Christianity has never been and never will be something one can do alone. We meet in church regularly to put our ideas to the test and to challenge each other when we veer towards self-indulgence. There are no rules for this but we have the assurance that we will not be alone.

Gal. 6:1 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2 Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.

Gal. 6:8 If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9 So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. 10 So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Amen