



10. Galatians 5:7-26

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Galatians 5:7-10

⁷You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?
⁸Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. ¹⁰I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.

Paul remembers how the Galatians were while he was with them. They have stopped ‘obeying the truth’, by which he means the ‘truth of the gospel’ (2:5,14). In behaving in this way they have stopped obeying ‘the one who calls you’, Christ himself. Those who are responsible for frightening them into abandoning Christ for observance of the law will have to pay a price for what they are doing.

Galatians 5:11

¹¹But, my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the scandal of the cross has been removed.

The Judaisers are telling the Galatians that Paul himself is ‘preaching circumcision’.

Luke tells us that when Paul visited Lystra, one of the churches of Galatia, after the Jerusalem Assembly, he met a young man called Timothy whose mother was a Jewess: ‘He wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek’ (Acts 16:3).

As a Jew, it was right that Timothy be faithful to his religious heritage. It was fidelity to Judaism as lived by Jesus that fired Paul in his mission to the Gentiles. Paul is not in principle opposed to circumcision.

However, to practice circumcision when appropriate is not the same as 'preaching circumcision', that is to say, instructing others as though circumcision was part of the gospel. This Paul would never do, as this letter amply demonstrates. To 'preach circumcision', as the Judaeans missionaries are doing, is to remove the scandal of the cross.

The cross is indeed a 'scandal', a stumbling block, for many could not accept that God would reveal his love and declare his will in such a scandalous way. But Christ did not die 'for nothing' (2:21). It is the love which he demonstrated on the cross that is God's power to save.

Galatians 5:12

¹²I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

It is terrible that those insisting on circumcision are ‘perverting the gospel of Christ’ (1:7). They are playing on people’s fear to persuade them to conform. Paul hopes that no one will listen to them. He hopes that they will ‘castrate themselves’ with the circumcision knives which they are wielding. That is to say, he hopes that they will have no ‘children’, no disciples. Is there an echo here of Jesus’ words: ‘If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off!’ (Mark 9:43)? Their focus on circumcision is taking them from Jesus. They would be better to castrate themselves.

Galatians 5:13-14

¹³You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence [σὰρξ], but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:8).

The ‘**freedom**’ (see 5:1) of which Paul is speaking is the freedom given by Christ, whether it be freedom from slavery to the false values of the pagan world (see 4:3,8-9), or freedom from subjection to the law (see 2:4; 3:23; 4:1, 24-25). It is freedom from sin (see Paul’s words to the Galatians on the occasion of his first visit, Acts 13:38-39). Already he has spoken paradoxically of his own freedom as expressed in being a ‘**slave of Christ**’ (1:10). He goes further here to speak of freedom to be ‘**slaves of one other**’. We are to be, as it were, prisoners of love, bound to each other body and soul, heart and mind, giving our lives for each other as Christ gave his for us.

In his letter Paul makes it perfectly clear that in rejecting the law as a necessary condition for enjoying communion with God he is not thereby rejecting morality; nor is he denying a place for the guidance provided by the law (he quotes Leviticus in verse fourteen), so long as it is recognised that life comes from the Spirit of Christ and not as a result of observance of the law. The freedom to which they are called is a freedom to live Christ's life.

We recall Paul's statement earlier in the letter: 'I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:19-20).

Galatians 5:15-16

¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take heed that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

We are not released from subjection to the law in order to be left to ourselves, a prey to our own unspiritual desires which can only draw us into sin. We are not left to ourselves. We have the Spirit of Christ as our source of life. It is probably here that we uncover the root cause of the problem in Galatia: insecurity concerning the problem of sin and how to cope with it. The Judaeian missionaries have been offering them the law with its clear directions and its institutional ways of finding forgiveness through the cult. Paul is anxious that they avoid the trap of this apparent security, and dare the journey they have already begun. He challenges them to ‘live by the Spirit’.

Galatians 5:17-18

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other. This is why you do the very things you do not wish to do. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to the law.

Paul is explaining to the Galatians why it is that they find themselves falling back into sin. It is not that the gospel which he preached is defective. Rather, it is because there is a battle going on between the life of Jesus in them, which is the gift of the Spirit, and the demands of their broken humanity which continue to make themselves felt.

The Judaeon missionaries have been pressuring them into thinking that the only way they can avoid falling into sin is to submit to the Jewish law. Paul is stating categorically that that does not work, for the law does not enable them to avoid sin. If they submit to the law they will still find themselves doing the very things they do not wish to do. This is because they **'cut themselves off from Christ'**, and so **'fall away from grace'**(5:4). No wonder they cannot resist the flesh. The only effective opposition to the flesh is the Spirit of Jesus, not the law.

Paul follows with a list of conventional vices, described as **'works of the flesh'**. These are typical ways in which we behave when we are enslaved by desires that have not been purified by the Spirit of Jesus.

Galatians 5:19-21

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious:

fornication

impurity

licentiousness

²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy,

anger, selfishness,

dissension, factions,

²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

I am warning you as I warned you before:

those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19

Now the works of the flesh are obvious:

fornication,

impurity

licentiousness

The list begins with ‘**fornication**’ (πορνεία): a word covering a whole range of morally irresponsible behaviour in matters of sexuality. He puts it first because the way we relate sexually is central to who we are and to the way we express or fail to express love. He then speaks of ‘**impurity**’ (ἀκαθαρσία): the pollution of our physical environment bears no comparison with the harm caused when we pollute the mind and heart. He goes on to name the vice of ‘**licentiousness**’ (ἀσέλγεια): unrestrained gratifying of sensual desire

Being a Christian means living in a certain way. It concerns the truth of who we are as persons. It is not surprising, therefore, that Paul moves immediately to speak of sexuality, for where else do all the dimensions of being human meet more intimately and more mysteriously than in our identity as man or woman? It is traditional Jewish and Christian wisdom that sexual relationships are meant to be sacraments in which we encounter the divine at the heart of another person cherished in love. There are divinely mysterious depths in every person. Sexual experience invites us into this mystery in which two people enjoy, encourage, heal, forgive and create each other in loving trust.

There is a restlessness and a mysterious yearning at the heart of sexuality, for we know that we are not sufficient of ourselves. We need the other; we long to be in communion with the other. It is common human wisdom, born of experience, that when we give expression to our sexual desire we should do so in a way that recognises the sacredness and the dignity of our own person and of the other.

Paul is speaking here of sexual behaviour which ignores all delicacy, by-passes love, and uses, even abuses, another person in a selfish attempt to assert one's own power or gratify one's own misdirected passion.

Galatians 5:20

²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy,

Paul lists the vice of worshipping false gods. For Paul, this is any god other than the God revealed by Jesus. Linked with this is the vice of **sorcery**. Rather than accepting human limitations and the mystery of our own being and of the world of which we are part, rather than placing trust in a loving God, we seek false assurances from people who claim to know the future or to be able to control spirits.

‘**Enmities**’ and ‘**strife**’ are found where people are defined by race, or by any other quality other than their being made in the image of God. In the churches of Galatia, the differences between being a Jew and being a Gentile are being accented. ‘**Jealousy**’ (ζήλος) is a form of ‘zeal’ motivated by self-interest. We hold on to what we have so tightly that we treat people as objects and are unwilling to share with others when love requires it.

Galatians 5:20-21

²⁰anger, selfishness, dissension, factions,

²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

Paul lists ‘**anger**’ among the vices. He is not speaking of appropriate anger when we defend ourselves or others against unjust aggression. Rather, he is speaking of the unreasonable and spiteful passion that can come over us when we fail to get our own way or have our own whims gratified. The many different ways in which ‘**selfishness**’ (ἐριθειᾶ) finds expression lead to ‘**dissensions**’, and create ‘**factions**’. Paul has in mind the ‘circumcision faction’ (2:12). We are ‘**envious**’ when we are unhappy with the prosperity of others, or the freedom they have in Christ. Being dissatisfied with who we are or with what we have, we want what others have. Paul concludes with ‘**drunkenness**’ and ‘**carousing**’. We lack moderation in our behaviour and in the way we seek to satisfy what we see as our needs.

Galatians 5:21

²¹I am warning you as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The Judaeans missionaries are blaming the sinful behaviour of the Galatians on Paul's failure to insist on their following the law. He reminds them that when he was with them he warned them against such behaviour. The answer however is not the law; it is the life of the Son, offered to them in the Spirit (4:6-7). To inherit it we must let Jesus' Spirit live in us.

Galatians 5:21

²¹I am warning you as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

In the context of inheritance, Paul speaks of the ‘**kingdom of God**’. Luke tells us that Paul ‘argued persuasively about the kingdom of God’ (Acts 19:8; also 20:25; 28:31), demonstrating in word and deed the presence and activity of God’s amazing love and what happens when we welcome that love into our lives. This was the subject of Jesus’ whole life and ministry, prior to his death (Luke 8:1; 16:16). It was to proclaim this kingdom that Jesus sent out his apostles (Luke 9:2,60; Acts 1:3), and it is for the coming of this kingdom that we are to pray (Luke 11:1). To inherit it we must let Jesus’ Spirit live in us.

Galatians 5:22-23

Paul follows the list of vices, not with a list of virtues, but with examples of what he calls 'the fruit of the Spirit'. To cut oneself off from Christ is to cut oneself off from these fruits.

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is

love

joy,

peace,

patience,

kindness,

generosity,

faith,

²³gentleness,

and self-control.

There is no law against such things.

love [ἀγάπη]

We are not surprised to find that the first fruit of the Spirit is love. Paul is not referring to the spontaneous feeling that one associates with one's spouse or family; nor is he referring to passionate desire, or the affection experienced between friends. He is speaking of the recognition one has of the value of another person in the light of what God has revealed in Christ. He is speaking of the decision to give one's life for others the way Christ gave his life for us. 'Love', as used here by Paul, speaks of faithful commitment to others whatever feelings circumstances may cause to arise within us. If we love we will achieve all that the law set out to achieve (5:13-14). However, love is not something which we can choose to do of ourselves. As we saw when examining love in relation to 5:6, love comes from God, and is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus through his Spirit.

Joy [χαρά]

The second fruit of the Spirit is joy: the joy of having Christ living in us (2:20); the joy of experiencing his Spirit in our hearts (4:6); the joy of knowing that we are heirs to the promise (3:29); the joy of experiencing the love of our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Peace [εἰρήνη]

The third fruit is peace. Paul prayed that the Galatians would know this peace in his opening greeting (1:3). It is the peace we experience when we are in the right relationship with God and are living the life of his Son. It finds expression in the community when differences are no longer sources of injustice or insecurity (see especially the differences mentioned in 3:28), but variations which enrich the community as various instruments enrich an orchestra. The peace promised here will be complete only when all creation unites in a cosmic hymn of praise.

Patience [μακροθυμία]

The fourth fruit of the Spirit is patience. The Greek ὑπομονη speaks of our ability to bear difficulties which are happening to us. The word used here by Paul is μακροθυμία. This refers to our sharing in God's magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by the opposition or suffering that ensues. It is the ability to remain constant in love and in a big (μακρο) way. It is a fruit of the Spirit because it can come only from God; it is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus 'loving me and giving himself for me' (2:20).

Kindness [χρηστότης]

The fifth fruit is kindness. It refers to whatever is pleasing, desirable, useful, lovely, valuable or morally good. Matthew associates it with the yoke of Jesus as against the yoke of the law (11:30), and for Luke it is characteristic of God who is 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (Luke 6:35).

Generosity [ἀγαθωσύνη]

Closely associated with kindness is the next fruit, generosity, perhaps better translated by the simple and profound word 'goodness'.

Faith [πίστις]

Then comes 'faith' or faithfulness. This has been a central theme of this letter. When we examined the meaning of πίστις in relation to 2:16, we saw that God is 'faithful': his love and his promises will never be withdrawn. Jesus lived this 'faith' to the full. Our faith is one of the fruits of his Spirit; our response to God's love revealed in Jesus.

Gentleness [πραΰτης]

A person who lives by the Spirit of Christ shares also in his gentleness, a characteristic that is typical of the heart of Jesus (see Matthew 11:28-29).

Self-control [ἐγκράτεια]

Self-control was considered a most important virtue in the Greek world. (see also 1Corinthians 7:9, 9:25; Titus 1:8).

Paul speaks of ‘self-control’ in how we express our sexual energy (1 Corinthians 7:9), and in what is required of athletes (1 Corinthians 9:25). Presbyters are to be ‘self-controlled’ (Titus 1:8).

Here he is speaking, not of control *by* the self, but of the control which we experience when we open ourselves to Jesus and to the gift of his Spirit. We are to live our lives in response to his inspiration. It is being, like Paul, a ‘slave of Christ’ (1:10).

Galatians 5:22-23

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joy,

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and self-control.

There is no law against such things.

Looking back over this list we become conscious of an important and fundamental dimension of Christian morality. Paul does not take away the Jewish law to replace it with a Christian equivalent. The command is not directly to follow certain precepts: it is to 'live by the Spirit' (5:16), to be 'led by the Spirit' (5:18). If we do this, then the Spirit will cause the above fruit to grow in our lives. Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us (see 2:20). Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with it, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis.

Galatians 5:24-26

- ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus
have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
- ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.
- ²⁶Let us not become conceited,
competing against one another, envying one another.

If the Galatians are concerned that they are sinning, the answer is not to subject themselves to the Jewish law. That will not give them the life they seek. The answer is to become more and more a **'slave of the Messiah'** (1:10), more and more allowing his Spirit to penetrate every aspect of our lives. To **'belong to the Messiah'** (3:29) demands, of course, that we die with him on the cross, dying to our selfishness (5:24) and giving our lives in love for others. It is to live **'in the Messiah'** (2:16-17; 3:26-28; 5:6). It is to be **'clothed with the Messiah'** (3:27). It is to have the Risen Jesus as one's Lord (1:3,10) and one's Redeemer (1:4; 2:20; 3:13; 4:4-5; 5:1). It is to **'live by the Spirit'** (5:25), **'guided by the Spirit'** (4:25).