

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 26th, 2016
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost: For Freedom's Sake
Rev. John Crow

1 Kings 19:15-21
Psalm 16:5-11
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

As 21st Century American Christians, it would be easy to overlook Paul's teaching regarding Christ's fulfillment of the Law. After all, the Jewish law has never been something we have lived under. In fact, ever since the founding of the Church almost 2,000 year ago, the Law has been sort of a footnote of historical interest to Christians. However, I am going to take the next two weeks to make the case that Paul's teaching regarding living a "post-law" life was then, and remains today, absolutely vital to understanding true faith in Christ. It just so happens that today's reading from Galatians 5 is all part of a larger pericope, or section of scripture with a connecting theme, which includes next week's epistle reading in Galatians 6. So, we have a little time to soak in Paul's teaching here. There's no rush, so sit back and relax, but please try to keep your eyes open.

I want to start with verse one of Galatians 5, because that verse is essentially Paul's topic sentence. As such, it is considered a bridge between what went

before, and what he is going to discuss next. This verse is also interesting because it is a perfect example of one of Paul's common teaching tools. This single verse includes both a theological truth that establishes a foundation and the application for how we are to live, based on this theological truth. It demonstrates Ronald Fung's view that Paul believes "**doctrine** is the foundation on which the Christian life is to be lived and **life** is the sphere in which doctrinal truths are to be applied" (The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle to the Galatians, pg 243). One other thing I need to point out before we jump into the text is that I will be primarily using a more literal translation along with the New Living Translation we heard read earlier. Some interesting points become apparent where the two diverge.

So what does verse one say? It starts by stating that Christ set us free in order to give us freedom. This sounds obvious, if not redundant. It is important, however, that Christ wants us free—not enslaved. This is one of those verses that would get resounding approval from people of all walks of life. Who doesn't like freedom? But it also raises an important question: Set us free from what?

The second phrase of verse one gives us a little more information about what we have been freed from, while it also gives us a life application that follows from the

theological truth in the first phrase. In fact, there are two imperatives for his readers. First; *stand firm*, or better yet, *keep standing firm*. Second, *do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery*. How are we to stand firm? And what is this *yoke of slavery*? The editorial team of the New Living Translation believes they have the answer, which is why they went ahead and translated *stand firm* as *stay free* and *yoke of slavery* as *slavery to the Law*. And I would agree with them. The reason Paul is telling the Galatians to remain free is because of Judaizers in their midst, who posed a significant threat to the fledgling Christianity. By teaching that Christians must take upon themselves the yoke of the Law, they were trying to get the Galatian Christians to abandon their most precious freedom of all: spiritual freedom.

That is why it was so important to Paul that they stand firm in their freedom. To the Jews, taking on the yoke of the Law was considered an act of devotion to God. It was honorable to do so, which is why it would be so tempting for Jewish converts to Christianity who deeply desired to be spiritually devout. But what was honorable for Jews was a misdirected way of life for Christians. But this was nearly 2,000 years ago. We don't face a Judaizer threat today. It would seem that there isn't much here to concern us. But are there not those

today who say in one way or another that faith alone is not enough? We typically refer to those as legalistic Christians. These are modern-day Pharisees who put obedience on a par with faith when it comes to our justification. In fact, the role of obedience in salvation is a major topic of debate among theologians today. Obedience is important, but it comes out as a result of our justification by faith, just as a cherry tree produces cherries out of the abundance of sunlight, water, and good soil. We cannot obey our way to salvation.

It would be easy for one to conclude that if Christ set us free from the Law, then how we behave is basically unimportant. If we are justified by faith in Christ, then obedience is “extra.” Why not live it up? This is another way of thinking that we can still find today among some Christians, though few will actually say it. Paul sees this line of reasoning coming a mile away, and stops it in its tracks. “[D]o not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh,” he cautions in verse 13.

We don’t live in a dualism where spirit and flesh are essentially independent of each other; what we do in the body impacts our spirit. Or as Maximus says in the movie *Gladiator*, “what we do in this life echoes in eternity.” It’s not possible to have a healthy, God-fearing spirit, but a body that is regularly engaged in self-corrupting sinful behavior. Obedience to God’s will is not only the fruit of faith,

but it is also the exercise that keeps our faith strong. While most other world religions poo-poo the body, Christianity elevates it.

The rest of today's passage lays out very clearly the conflict between the spirit nature, guided by the Holy Spirit, and the sinful nature, traditionally referred to as "the flesh." So where does that leave the Law, and the threat of the Judiazers?

The Judiazers can be ignored because as we see in verse 23, the Spirit has *no conflict with the law*. In fact, a few verses earlier, Paul writes that love sums up the entire law. Another way to look at this is to recognize that while the Law sets minimum standards, it doesn't ask for more. Love, on the other hand, has no limits. You will never love too much. Living in love is what a "post-law" life is all about. So here is the irony: we are at the same time both not subject to the Law, but striving to fulfill it in love! But if we get these things out of order, then we are trying to save ourselves through obedience, and are once again enslaved.

Let's take the last few minutes then, to investigate the conflict laid out for us between the spirit nature and the sinful nature. Six times in this short passage we find the Greek word "sarx," which literally means flesh, and is interpreted as *sinful nature*. It is this sinful nature that is at war with the spirit nature, and as we see

from verse 17, it is impossible to sit on the sidelines in this war. And if you notice, the conflict isn't posed as chose to obey or not obey, but rather, chose your side, and your actions will then fall in line with the side you have chosen. This is similar to the Cold War, when western militaries used NATO-standard ammunition, and eastern militaries used Warsaw Pact-standard ammunition. One's ammunition was determined by one's side.

Today we find ourselves in a war with our sinful nature, and we dare not try to use the ammunition, or deeds, of that nature. Of course, none of us are perfect, and we will at times find ourselves pulled in the wrong direction. When that happens, we need reminding of whom we serve: the One who sacrificed Himself for us, and of whose body and blood we are about to partake. In doing so, we declare emphatically that we are soldiers on the side of the Spirit. It is He who empowers our lives to bear the fruit of the Spirit. And just as good soldiers will sacrifice everything when called to do so, both today's epistle and gospel readings end with a call to live a "post-law" life by laying it all on the line for our Savior. The sinful nature will not be defeated through a half-hearted effort. We need to choose our side, pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal to us areas that need to change, and work diligently to follow-through.