

## **“Flesh vs. Spirit”**

June 28, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

The first verse of this morning's Scripture lesson says, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” But then the end of verse 13 says, “Through love become enslaved to one another.” Hmm, do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... become enslaved to one another.” I don't know why people say the Bible is sometimes hard to understand.

For this to make sense, we have to remember a little more about Paul's letter to the Galatians. As part of his missionary journeys, Paul went to the city of Galatia and started a church there. After living and sharing and teaching with them for about a year and a half, Paul felt the church leadership was strong enough to continue growing the church without him and he left for Arabia – modern day Jordan and Saudi Arabia. After Paul left, traveling missionaries from Jerusalem came to Galatia and continued to minister with the congregation. But many of these preachers were what we call Judaizers. They viewed Christianity as a branch of Judaism and therefore taught the church to obey the Jewish Law – first focusing on the need for males to be circumcised and for everyone to obey the Jewish dietary laws. These were outward symbols of obedience. Circumcision being a one time, unchangeable statement of faith with the dietary laws being a continuing act of obedience. There is something to be said for things like circumcision – a bold, permanent, life-changing proclamation that your life has changed and you will never go back to the way it was. Twenty-some years ago in a combined church choir rehearsal, I sat behind a woman who had a name and interlocking circles tattooed across the back of her neck. Being the curious type, I asked her about it. With great pride she responded, “That is my husband's name. He has my name tattooed on the back of his neck. We had then done on our honeymoon. You can take a ring off. A tattoo is forever.” I appreciated the boldness. Of course the next year when the choirs got together again, she was wearing high-collar shirts that completely covered her neck because she and her husband were not together anymore. They were good with the one time, emotionally charged, bold statement, not so good with actually changing their lives, adapting and celebrating one another.

Any way, in today's reading, Paul is writing to the church in an effort to correct the new preachers' teachings. He is reminding them that Jesus had already fulfilled the law and therefore freed us from the law. Connecting with God was no longer about circumcision and dietary restrictions, but through Jesus. Jesus was God with us and Jesus got in trouble for breaking the law. The law had its place until Jesus arrived, but now Jesus is the way the God, the way to forgiveness, the way to resurrection, the way home. Paul is reminding the people of Galatia what they learned from him when they first came to faith. Jesus has set them free. Free

from their sins, free from the past, free from the law, free from guilt and shame. As he says in verse 1, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” If the preacher tries to make you in their image, if Sunday School teacher tries to make you in their image, if a soldier tries to make you in their image, if the law tries to make you in its image; “Stand firm... and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

But this is not Paul’s first rodeo. He knows when we hear we are free, we hear that we are free from an overseer and therefore get to do whatever we want. Which usually leads to a stampede of selfishness. Since the garden of Eden we have always wanted to do things our way. We want life to revolve around us, our desires, our wants, our thoughts of what will make us happy. We want to feel special, feel victorious, feel we are better than our neighbor. Bells of freedom bring us back to our basic instinct as members of the animal and even plant kingdoms. A tree grabs as much sunlight as it can, shading the ground below to inhibit other plants that might take some of its water and nutrients. Wolves battle for dominance in the pack in order to win the strongest mate and rule the pack. People compete to climb the ladder to attract better mates and more influence so we can create the world around us in our image, the way we think it should be. Being free from another means we are free to do what we couldn’t before. We act it’s our 21st birthday and spend our whole week’s paycheck getting drunk, “because we can.” Never mind being old enough to drink means we are also old enough not to drink. We are free to, so we do.

Like I said, this isn’t Paul’s first rodeo. He goes ahead and names our normal reaction. Verse 13, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” He then calls us out by naming everything we would do if we were free, listing them as “works of the flesh” – self-indulgence that moves beyond our bodily urges to our mind and emotions including everything from sexual immorality to jealousy, anger, quarreling and drunkenness. Paul says you are welcome to take your new freedom and do all these things, but, says verse 23, “I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Paul reminds us it is not so much about what we are freed from, as what we are freed to. We are free to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are free to let Jesus’ love for us change us. Change us into a people who look at our neighbor and let their need define our actions. Be enslaved to them. Not tattoo their name on the back of our neck, but make the changes in our lives that allow their life to be just as important as our own. To enter the process we sang about this morning, to be a little more like Jesus, and little less like me. Remember the second verse with me. It says,

Yeah, there's no denying I have changed  
'Cause I've been saved from who I used to be  
But even at my best, I must confess

I still need help to see the way You see  
Somebody with a hurt that I could have helped  
Somebody with a hand that I could have held  
When I just can't see past myself  
Lord, help me be  
A little more like mercy, a little more like grace  
A little more like kindness, goodness, love, and faith  
A little more like patience, a little more like peace  
A little more like Jesus, a little less like me

Do you hear the fruits of the Spirit in there. Help me, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Paul needed his friends to remember being a Jesus follower is a life-long process. It is not a one and done tattoo or surgery or public statement of faith. Sure there are concrete steps along the way. We have baby dedications, membership classes, and baptism. People can move from being junior deacons to deacons to elders and teachers and committee chairs and so on. Each step is another step to becoming a little more like Jesus and a little less like me. But it is a process, and because it is a process, it is sometimes challenging because how do you know. I imagine there were adult men in Galatia wanting to be circumcised to show their faith in Christ. People were willing to adopt new food practices to show their piety. They wanted tangible markers of their new existence in Christ. There is a security there. They just didn’t have enough maturity and discernment to see how harmful it was to focus on outward signs instead of real transformation – to think a permanent tattoo meant a permanent marriage. Faithfulness is a never-ending process, but Paul does give us security markers. If you find your life being defined a little less by works of the flesh, of self-indulgence: you know, “impurity... strife, jealousy, anger, quarreling, dividing into factions, envy... and things like these” then you know you are in the process. If you find joy and peace sneaking in. If you find a little more patience, a little more kindness, a little more generosity building inside you. If your love for others is being defined by faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; then know God is working in you, touching you, transforming you, and making you new. Look for somebody with a hurt that you can help, somebody with a hand that you can hold, and you will know you have been set free to be enslaved to one another.

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