

Spirited
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
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Rev. Emily Peck-McClain

Galatians is one of the earliest of Paul's letters and might even be earliest book of the New Testament. It was written probably somewhere between 49 and 52. Galatians gives us a beautiful window into what was happening in communities of people who followed the teachings of Jesus Christ, who had been crucified some twenty years before. One of the main questions for this group of new Christians was about how they were to live their lives. Did they need to follow Jewish Law, even though most of these people were not Jewish? Did they need to concern themselves with Roman Law, even though Rome had ordered the death of their Christ?

Paul was Jewish and understood concern about the Law. He knew Torah and knew it as the way to live a life close to God and to live in a holy way. However, after an amazing religious experience, Paul found himself preaching the Law of Christ, not the Law of Torah that he grew up with, nor Roman law, which was the governing and imperial presence in this area of the world at the time. Paul's mission was to the Gentiles (non-Jews) and Galatia was a community of mostly Gentiles, with a few Jewish people in their midst. So when Paul speaks about law, everyone in the community hears something – they think either of Torah or they think of Roman Law. Isn't it nice to know exactly what you should and should not do? Sometimes I sort of yearn for that time, maybe in early childhood, when things were so easy and so black & white – wash your hands before dinner; don't fight with your brother. But in verse 4, Paul writes, "You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from

grace” (in v. 4, which we did not read today). He says, “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This also shows up in the Gospels – Paul is indeed preaching the Law of Christ. For those who believe in Christ and seek to follow his teaching, Paul knows that adhering to another law will get in the way. Paul was not going around to faithful Jewish people who found their faith in God through Torah and telling them to get out from underneath this law. Paul’s mission was to Gentiles, Paul’s audience of this letter is people who are not finding faith in God through Law. They find faith in God through Christ and are getting mixed up about how to live in a way that reflects that.

This Law of Christ is described by Paul in a fascinating way. Following the Law of Christ is freedom to be slaves to one another in love. We do not think of slavery as a good thing. It is impossible for us to hear “slavery” and think we should do anything but begin a fight for freedom and justice. But Paul describes this slavery as freedom. It’s hard to even know what to do with that. The freedom offered by the yoke of Christ is the freedom to be fully human, fully the way we were created to be. Christ shows us what it is like to be fully human. He shows us how to live in beloved community, how to seek justice from oppression, how to be on the side of the poor, how to love each other, how to love God. This is what we are all created to be! This is the yoke of Christ, the law of Christ, which Paul tells us to live under. Christ was fully God in addition to being fully human and that is, of course, where we part ways. For none of us was created to be God! We are, however, created for freedom in Christ. What were we freed for? And what were we freed from? Paul answers those questions in his talk about the works of flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. We are freed from being enslaved to the works of flesh and we are

freed for cultivating the fruits of the spirit. We are freed for loving our neighbour as ourselves and thus fulfilling the law of Christ.

Works of the flesh, Paul says, are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. When I think about being enslaved to works of the flesh, I have to update the language and place the thought in our time & our place. Otherwise I feel like I'm in the middle of *The Crucible* or something. So let me ask you, ask myself: What do you spend your energy and time focused on? When you look at your week and your energy, do you remember more times of anger or of love? Do you spend time looking at other people in the street and thinking, "I wish I looked like them?" Do you look in all the store windows and think, "I want, I want, I want"? Do you drink too much? Argue too much? These are not some puritanical questions trying to repress us into passionless people. These are questions that help us think about whether we are living our life in a way that shows we are free to love our neighbour. There is a lot that can distract us from being involved in what we need to be involved in. For Paul, it is the concept of spirit v. flesh that helps him understand the world he is living in. I think of our goal as not to separate our spirit (or the work of the Spirit) from our bodies. Our goal is to free our bodies to live as one with our spirit and in the work of the Spirit.

Fruit of the spirit, according to Paul are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And he assures us, that there is no law against such things. No Torah law and no law of Christ. "Most fruits grow best when they receive some attention. We cannot make fruit. It is not within our human ability. Fruit has to grow, and it takes time to grow. Manufactured substitutes can look attractive

but never have the same qualities, taste and depth. Spiritual fruits are not instant items. They grow and ripen as part of God's garden, but they always benefit from being tended and fed. Fruit have two purposes. Their primary task is to carry and produce new life. They can also be used to enrich the life of humanity, bringing health and happiness.”
(from www.churchofscotland.org.uk)

It's interesting to me that we have “works” of flesh and “fruit” of the Spirit. This leads me to think that the works of the flesh do not grow fruit, good or bad. It's like they fall flat, they yield nothing. What kind of work might yield fruit? Our bodies do a lot during our week – it's certainly not to say that unless we're sitting praying, our bodies aren't yielding fruit, right? When during your week has your body done work that is not enslaved to those things Paul lists: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. When we take on the yoke of slavery instead of that of Christ, our works are not spirited. Spirited works can be planted and can grow, can sustain and can supply our neighbors with what their own spirits might need: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we live as spirited people, we live in freedom, only subject to the law of Christ, which is love. When we live as spirited people, we live into our call to be fully human.