

To Be Marked

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Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Before I jump straight into this second text, I want to remind you that the book of Galatians is a letter. It's always a little awkward to read other people's mail. The letter is from a real person to real people dealing with real things. And all the previous conversations, the memories, the disagreements — all of those are part of the letter, too, even if they aren't named explicitly.

This letter was written by Paul to the people in the church he founded in Galatia. He wrote it because he was anxious for this little church.

He's anxious because after he formed the church and left town for more missionary opportunities, some other apostles came to Galatia.

And they taught that Paul's understanding of the gospel was incomplete and inadequate. These apostles claimed that in order to be saved, in order to belong to the people of God, everyone needed to follow dietary laws and men needed to be circumcised.

Paul gets word of this and he sends off a letter to warn the Galatians away from this teaching in the strongest possible terms. If ALL CAPS had been a thing back then, Paul would have used them. What the Galatians are hearing, Paul says, is a FALSE GOSPEL.

Paul writes desperately to remind the Galatian church that people are saved NOT through the law, but through Jesus Christ (2:16). No need to follow dietary laws. No need for circumcision. We are saved through Christ alone.

Why, you might be wondering, was this such a big deal? Isn't this gospel just a variation on a theme and relatively harmless?

NO! Paul says. What followers of Christ need to know and trust above all else is that salvation is a gift of grace from God alone. It doesn't come from following the law or any other action we take. There is nothing we do to earn salvation. To trust this gift of grace, Paul believes, is by its very nature a radical reorientation of our lives, freeing us to live in wholly new ways.

So, with that context in mind, listen now for the word of God to you this day.

Second Reading Galatians 5:1, 13-25

1For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

13For 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. 14For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

16Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17For 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, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19Now the works of the flesh are obvious:

fornication, impurity,
licentiousness, 20idolatry,
sorcery, enmities,
strife, jealousy,
anger, quarrels,
dissensions, 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.

22By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

This month we are offering a sermon series focused on what it means to be the church. Our Clerk of Session made the comment recently that church isn't a product we consume, but a project we work on together.¹

The church isn't a product we consume, but a project we work on together together.

¹ Thanks to Liza Marshall for this!

Yay, group work!

This means that church is radically different than many other organizations we're familiar with in a capitalist society, where so much gets turned into goods we buy or fee-for-service outfits. You don't pay \$5.99 a month for access to lovely music and witty sermons each Sunday. You don't pay a fee for your child to be baptized or to be cared for and raised in faith. There are no dues here. Even the offerings you give are not so that someone else can create a nice packaged experience of "church" that you then consume.

What we do here is come together to try — as best we can — to live in a particular way as God's people in the world.

Over dinner one night, a seminary friend asked me why I go to church. It was a serious question. He's wrestling with who God is and what the purpose of the church is today. Why do you go to church?

He said that he's been asking his colleagues and friends lately...probably a dozen conversations. Mostly he'd heard from folks two answers.

- 1) community.
- 2) to do good work in the world.

Those are fine answers. I hope that in coming to church you'll find community and you'll be part of doing good work in the world.

But honestly, for the church to have lasted more than 2000 years, it's gotta be more than this. For any of us to stick with church day in and day out, especially now when there is almost no social pressure to be here, there has to be more than this.

I am pretty sure, that if Paul heard us saying that we come to church for community and to do good work, we, too, would receive a letter written in ALL CAPS.

Martin Luther saw this letter as key to the 16th century reform of the church. He believed Galatians was hugely significant for the Protestant understanding of the life of faith.²

² Boring, Eugene & Craddock, Fred. The People's New Testament Commentary. Louisville: WJK, 2008, p. 575.

If I understand the text, what's at stake for Paul in writing this letter — and what's at stake for us as we try to be faithful — is the very act of salvation and what it means to belong to the people of God.

What Paul says in this letter is that we have been saved by Christ. Full stop. There are no further requirements. That free grace is what is so radical about the faith Paul found in Christ and the faith he's trying to pass on to the Galatians. The faith he's trying to pass on to us. The faith in which we baptize babies at this font.

Trusting in Christ, accepting such a radical grace, frees us from everything that binds us. And, Paul is quick to add, it also frees us FOR something. In very evocative language, Paul tells us this salvation in Christ frees us to forego our own desires...to become slaves to one another.

Salvation in Christ frees us to forego our own desires... to become slaves to one another.

I want to pause here for a minute on the graphic language Paul uses here as he talks about our desires. He lists off fifteen "works of the flesh," a list one preacher has called "the Terribles"³ — fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

It wouldn't take much work to pluck a few examples of the "Terribles" from this week's news, would it?

We would likely all agree these are behaviors of which we disapprove. And yet, this is also a place where I believe Christianity has misinterpreted and misused Paul's writing for centuries.

Paul has often been used by the church to create an unhealthy dualism between "Flesh" (bad) and "Spirit" (good). This has led the church to privilege thinking over feeling, to privilege afterlife to this life. And in so doing, it has done significant harm. It's also not what Paul is saying. Paul isn't making a division between Flesh and Spirit. He's saying that salvation reorients ALL OF IT. Together.

Theologian Mark Douglas notes that the list of "Terribles" includes both material desires (fornication, drunkenness) and spiritual desires (idolatry, sorcery). Douglas also

³ Carol Holtz-Martin, *Feasting on the Word – Year C*, vol. 3 – Homiletical, p. 187.

notes that the flesh is not bad in and of itself, but because it wants too much or too little – wanting sexual intimacy, we pursue fornication; wanting contact with Divine, we pursue idolatry; wanting joy, we carouse.⁴

Again, Paul isn't making a division between Flesh and Spirit. He's saying that salvation reorients ALL OF IT. And that salvation sets us free to love one another.

It's not a theoretical love. It's a love that shows up in joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control. I don't know how those things get worked out in your house, but I can tell you that raising a 4 year old and an infant doesn't require theoretical patience. It requires the patience that comes with a lot of deep breathing. My marriage doesn't require theoretical generosity. It requires giving of my energy for John's well-being. And his for mine. Raising the children of this church in faith doesn't require theoretical faithfulness. It requires all those volunteers and teachers and nursery workers to show up day in and day out to offer care and nurture to our youngest members.

Unfortunately, the church — over the course of history — has focused a great deal on “the Terribles.” And it has taken a “pick and choose” approach to which of these “Terribles” receive attention and rebuke and which have been allowed to slide into our common life uninhibited. Not only does this create hypocrisy within us, but it has done deep, deep harm, particularly to people over their gender and sexuality.

If we are honest, we must note that some of “The Terribles” (like jealousy, anger, factions, and envy) are socially acceptable and even admired in our culture.⁵ And if we are willing to be even more honest, we can see the “Terribles” at work in our own lives, sometimes in clear ways, but more often in insidious ways that we all too easily excuse away.

The power of these “Terribles” is exactly why Paul uses such stark language like the “yoke of slavery” and “the crucifixion of the flesh” when he talks about them. And it is why he argues that a **real death**, a crucifixion, stands between the evils of the former way and the goodness of the Christian life.⁶

⁴ Mark Douglas, *Feasting on the Word – Year C*, vol. 3, Theological, pp. 186, 188).

⁵ Boring & Craddock, 592.

⁶ Boring & Craddock, p. 592.

And that gets us back to Paul's main point. And it is really good news. In the saving death of Christ you have been set free. You are no longer subject to the law. You live NOT to indulge yourself, but to be bound to one another.

We live not to indulge ourselves, but to be bound to one another.

And that new way of life bears fruit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Theologian NT Wright puts it this way:

Paul insists on an all-out, no holds barred, practice of belief. What he's describing here is not "see if you can, perhaps, eventually, ...manage to get somewhere reasonably close to this..." What Paul is after is wholesale adoption of a ~~cruciform~~ worldview and life [formed in these waters of baptism where, by God's grace, we die and rise with Christ]. Indeed the works of the flesh are apparent all around; the followers of Christ must be different!⁷

And here's the catch. This is really hard to do. If not, wouldn't we all do it? And wouldn't our society (not to mention our souls) be happier and healthier?

And friends, that's why I come to church.

I believe the central story of our faith is the movement from fear and death to hope and new life. I see that movement most clearly in the cross and resurrection and believe that movement is what God is about. But we live in a world that feels like it is always tipping between fear and hope, between hate and love, between dead ends and new life. And lately, I admit it feels to me like fear and hate and dead ends are far more powerful than hope and love and new life. So I need to come to this place. And I need to be able to weep and to pray and to hear again the Good News. And I need to be surrounded by you all...people who are, like me, trying — imperfectly to be sure, but trying nonetheless — to live as those who have been saved. To embody love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control day by day, week by week, year by year.

That's what we're trying to do here at GPC. Cultivate a community that understands itself as those who have found freedom in Christ. And a community that — because of that grace — lives in a particular way with a particular set of behaviors. Not just as nice

⁷ Wright, NT. Paul and the Faithfulness of God. Fortress Press, 2014, 758.

character traits, but because we want those fruits to take root in the world so that all God's people are set free.

It's not a product we consume. It's a project we work on together.

And by God's power, we will accomplish far more than we dare ask or imagine.
May it be so. Amen.