

“Do Not Grow Weary” – Galatians 6:7-16 – July 7, 2019

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Today we come to the end of Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia, and as he closes it out, he summarizes the themes of his message to them. He has written to them because some so-called teachers of the gospel have been preaching to them a message that is confusing. There were Jewish Christians who were trying to tell the Gentiles in Galatia that they needed to come under the Jewish Law – the Law of Moses – before they could become fully Christian. Specifically, they had been preaching the need for circumcision. For these Jewish Christians, circumcision was necessary for the Gentiles because it was a sign that they were now part of the covenant with God.

In this letter, Paul wanted to set the record straight. The gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims a new covenant with God, a covenant that no longer demands adherence to the Law that was given to the Jews following their exodus from slavery in Egypt. Following the Law was not a requirement for becoming a follower of Christ.

But then Paul follows up with reminding them of the contrast of living according to the flesh versus living according to the Spirit. We talked about this last week. Remember, the distinction here isn’t a physical one – material things versus spiritual things – but it is an ethical distinction – doing what is right according to God – loving God and loving one’s neighbor – versus satisfying one’s own needs – fulfilling one’s own needs and desires, no matter the cost or consequences to others.

So what he is saying seems to be paradoxical. You don’t need to live according to the Law to become a Christian, however, as a follower of Christ, you should follow the essence of the Law in how you live your life. It sort of boils down to this – you don’t NEED to do it, you don’t need to follow the law – but, you should follow the law. When asked which of the Jewish laws was the most important, Jesus responded, love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

This goes back again to what we talked about last week. In Christ we experience freedom. We are freed from slavery to our own self-centered desires. It is not freedom to live however we want, doing whatever we want, whenever we want simply to satisfy our own selfish inclinations. In Christ, we are freed from our bondage to sin, free to live according to God’s Spirit. Because that’s the key. God’s Spirit. It is only through God’s Spirit at work in our lives that we are able to truly live out our freedom in Christ. God’s Spirit infuses us with God’s love so we are able to love others.

Paul says to the Galatians – “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.” What Paul is saying is that becoming a Christian, and not being tied to the Jewish law, does not give one free license to live a life of debauchery. Becoming a Christian does not give one a “get out of jail free” card. Paul says that if you live by putting your own desires first, you will be subject to the consequences of your actions. All actions have consequences. We don’t live in a vacuum. Every thing we do has an impact – on someone else, on ourselves, on the created world. And eventually those consequences add up – for good or for ill.

On Friday I went on a geocaching adventure with a friend down to Milwaukee, and on the way back we stopped in Oshkosh to meet up with some other geocaching acquaintances. One of them asked me about my call to ministry. She was intrigued by what I do and wondered how and why I became a pastor. So I told her the whole story – the Reader’s Digest Condensed Version – going back to my conversion experience back in college and my call by God and then on to the Baptist seminary, and my change in course by becoming Presbyterian. But I told her, in the end, I want to help people live lives of wholeness in Christ, and I want to help them to not be jerks to one another.

Paul gets it. He knows that living a life of freedom in Christ is hard. We need the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit to live out this life in Christ. He points out to the Gentile Christians that even the Jewish Christians don’t follow the Law. Not completely. And the law is flawed. It is through the strength of the Spirit that we persevere. Paul says to them, “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest times, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...” Don’t grow weary. Life in Christ is hard, but in the end, it’s all worthwhile.

As you read this letter of Paul to the Galatian church, you can hear his frustration, but also his encouragement and his love for this church. He wants the Jewish Christians to back off in trying to make the Gentiles follow the law and get circumcised. They are focused on the wrong thing, and in so doing, they are compromising their own walk of faith. He wants the Gentile Christians to remember the message of the gospel that he taught them and not listen to the others who want to distort it into something it isn’t. And he wants them all to pursue a life of faith, relying on God’s Spirit to mold them into something new – people who passionately follow Christ and evidence that in the good fruit that their lives produce – kindness, compassion, generosity, love.

And so, too, Paul’s letter is for us. We get caught up in our own fears and self-serving desires. We pursue our own wants no matter the consequences. We allow ourselves to be influenced by people and ideas that run counter to the message of Christ’s gospel. We hold fast to what we believe is Gospel truth but only serves to reinforce our own wrong ideas. We hold the Spirit of God at bay, refusing to change, wanting to keep our lives of comfort rather than reaching out in love to others who need God’s love. We ignore situations in our communities and world that are blatantly opposed to the message of the gospel. We act like jerks to one another.

Like the Galatian church, we are works in progress. Paul exhorts us to not grow weary in doing what is right. It’s hard work. It pulls us away from our comfort zones. It forces us to change our bad habits. It pushes us to see people and situations with new eyes. We can’t change on our own. To become followers of Christ, we need to let God’s Spirit in, to mold us into something new. May it be so.