

Sunday 13 2010 C

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

June 27, 2010

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Friends:

“The Spirit and the flesh.” Were you paying attention to our second lesson today, the reading from Galatians? The Apostle Paul was talking about the works of the flesh, and the fruit of the Spirit. Paul was putting those things in opposition to each other, the flesh and the Spirit, the *works of the flesh* and the *fruit of the Spirit*. Were you paying attention? I don’t blame you for losing focus. These scripture readings come at you like– did you ever see Lucy and Ethel in the candy factory? I spend a week getting ready for these lessons on Sunday, but they surge into your minds on a weekend morning in a matter of minutes, writings written in two to three languages, some of them a thousand years before Christ, some of them a hundred years after Christ. We have a kind of shotgun approach, in the Lutheran Church. We’re going to fire all of this spiritual ammunition at you, and surely some of it is going to hit you.

We’ve been shooting Galatians at you for four weeks now. Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches. Although it’s only a short six chapters long, I consider it the best and clearest message in the whole Bible. It’s the best, it’s the clearest– and it’s still not easy to understand. “The Spirit and the flesh.” What is Paul talking about?

To understand Paul, you have to understand that he is talking about not just the Spirit and the flesh, but [he is talking about] THE LAW, the Spirit, and the flesh. The Law. The rules. The regulations. The rituals. Religious things. There were these Christians in Galatia. They were Gentiles. Non-Jews, like you and me. After Paul had spent time with them, and taught them, and built them up their congregations, he went away to serve other Christian communities. He had taught the Christians in Galatia that they did not have to keep the Jewish Law. They had never been Jewish. As new Christians, they did not suddenly have to keep Jewish dietary law. And they did not suddenly have to circumcise all of the males. But Paul left. And we can imagine that some of the new Christians in Galatia acted recklessly. Their new Christian religion, as it had been taught to them by Paul, did not give them a code of conduct. They did not have any rules to follow. We can imagine– the letter implies– that some of them acted recklessly.

If you want a whole catalog of reckless behavior, be sure to check out the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. The Corinthian Christians were the John Belushi “Animal House” of early Christianity. Now we don’t know if any of the Christians in Galatia acted recklessly, but we do know that a group of preachers and teachers came along after Paul had left. And these preachers

and teachers told the Christians in Galatia that in order to be *right* with God, in order to be secure and at peace, in order to qualify for God's kingdom, they needed to keep the Law: the Law of circumcision, of dietary restrictions, and all the rules and requirements that God had given to Moses and to the Jews, as a covenant, a sign of that special relationship that God has with the children of Jacob.

These Galatian Christians felt anxiety. Anxiety. Spiritual freedom causes anxiety. Do you know what I mean? Until recently, I was able to put people in boxes. Good people, bad people. God's favorite people, God's rejected people. People like me. People like them. And NOW I can't do that. I can't do that because I am worshiping a Jewish man who went around eating with tax collectors and prostitutes, who forgave criminals on the cross, and who healed people on the Sabbath. That's the guy I worship. That's the guy I follow. Isn't that true of you?

This guy brings us into a relationship with God, a relationship that relativizes all of our other relationships and priorities. Martin Luther described that relationship with a Latin phrase: *Coram deo*— in the face of God. Being in the face of God, *living* in the face of God, is a scary place to be. It is also the place of Grace. In the face of God, we are acutely aware of our inadequacy. We are acutely aware of how utterly dependent we are upon the mercy and love that we customarily speak of as Grace. This is the profound experience that Lutherans and all Christians call justification. Justification by grace, through faith.

The problem for the Galatian Christians— and frankly, the problem for all Christians— is that we want to justify ourselves. So we tally up our good deeds, and our bad deeds, and try to rationalize that our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds. Or we compare ourselves to those around us, and tell ourselves that at least we aren't as bad as they are. Or we seek security by justifying ourselves with rituals and regulations, like circumcision— the Law of Moses, which is so venerable and so uniquely wise— and that's what the Galatian Christians were beginning to do.

Paul's letter is a challenge to maintain the freedom that we have when we stand in the face of God. To not try to justify ourselves with works of the law. But also not to become slaves to the flesh. Our crudest desires, our most selfish impulses— what Sigmund Freud called the "id"— we can become enslaved to these things as well. Ask anyone who has ever had an addiction problem. Paul calls selfishness, witchcraft, factionalism, and sexual immorality the *works* of the flesh. Just like the *works* of the law. *Works* are the things that we do to escape from freedom. To escape from the anxiety of God's presence. There are noble works. And there are shameful works. But they are still works, preoccupied with our selves, our egos, and our self-justification.

In contrast to *works* of the law, and *works* of the flesh, Paul talks about the *fruit* of the spirit. Not the *fruits* [plural] of the spirit. But the fruit. Fruit doesn't come from active striving. This spring, I was watching and watching for the saguaro blossoms. The more I watched, the more they wouldn't come. And when I quit watching, suddenly, there they were. Fruit of the spirit is like that. Life in the Spirit bears fruit— love, joy, peace, etc. We don't strive for it. Beware of

striving. Sometimes, Christians strive for the right reasons. But 90% of our striving is motivated by fear or ego, which are not the Christian motivators. So we ought to aim, NOT for works, but for fruit. *“I am the vine, you are the branches,”* our Master said. *“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”* Works of the flesh. Works of the Law. *Fruit* of the Spirit.

We do throw a lot at you in worship. Like Lucy and Ethel in the candy factory, good Christians like you can be overwhelmed by the amount of Bible and prayers that comes at you in what might look to you like. Galatians is a diamond of the Bible. Small, but unbreakable, and valuable, and enduring. It is Paul’s challenge to us that Christ Jesus has set us free, and that we must not enslave ourselves again. *“Stand firm,”* Paul says in today’s reading, *“Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* Amen.