

<sup>1</sup>My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. <sup>2</sup>Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

<sup>7</sup>Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup>So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

<sup>11</sup>See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! <sup>12</sup>It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. <sup>13</sup>Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. <sup>14</sup>May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. <sup>15</sup>For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! <sup>16</sup>As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Today we come to the end of our six-week series on Paul's letter to the Galatians. If we were to choose one word that best sums up what Paul has been saying in this letter, it would probably be the word "freedom".

Many of the people in the churches of Galatia had fallen prey to the idea that they had to meet certain requirements in order to be a "real" Christian. They had come to believe that their relationship with God was determined -- to at least some extent -- by what they do or don't do. This type of thinking is sometimes referred to as "merit badge theology" because it is based on the premise of accumulating points to earn an award.

Paul's purpose in writing this letter is to set people free from this merit badge theology by proclaiming the Good News that there is nothing anyone can do, or fail to do, that will affect God's love for them. There is nothing anyone can do because Jesus Christ has already done everything that needs doing. In Jesus, God has proven himself to be righteous -- to be faithful to his promises -- and so there is nothing left to be done. Our salvation, our relationship with God, was established once and for all time by Jesus' death and resurrection, and nothing will ever change that.

I would expect that this is all "old news" for most of us. This word of freedom says that we don't have to do anything, or live by any special rules, or have any special spiritual experiences in order to be a Christian. That is comforting news and it's always "good news", but it's still the familiar "old, old story" that we've heard over and over again.

But just when we think we've heard everything that Paul has to say and perhaps start wishing for something fresh and new to hold our attention, Paul ends his letter with a zinger. He has spent five chapters telling us there is nothing we have to do, and then, from out of nowhere, he talks about a Last Judgment at which everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, will be judged according to their deeds. He uses the language of the harvest, a common metaphor for the final judgment:

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Can these words have been written by the same person who just three chapters earlier had said, "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" (3:11)

Paul would seem to be inconsistent here, but he is dealing with a question that goes beyond consistency and logic. Religious truth is multi-faceted, much like a diamond, and to fully understand and appreciate this truth, it is necessary to look at it from more than one angle. Oftentimes these truths can only be expressed in the form of a "dialectic". Those of you who have been around here for awhile know that I talk about dialectics a lot. If the term is unfamiliar to you, simply put, a dialectic is two statements that contradict each other, but both of which are held to be true. A dialectic is taking an either/or question and answering it with a "yes". Our Christian faith is full of dialectics:

Is Jesus human or divine? Yes.

Is God one or is God three (Father, Son, & Holy Spirit)? Yes.

Another dialectic deals with the existence of evil in the world. Is God loving or all-powerful? If God were both loving and all-powerful, we would expect God to eliminate evil. Since evil obviously exists, logic would deduce that God is either not all-powerful (God loves us but can't do anything about eliminating evil) or else is not

loving (God has the power to eliminate evil, but doesn't love us enough to do so). But to the question "Is God loving or all-powerful?" the Christian faith answers, "Yes."

The dialectic Paul is wrestling with in Galatians has to do with justification, the word the Bible uses to refer to our relationship with God. The dialectic is this: Is our relationship with God based on what God does (justification by grace) or is it based on what we do (justification by works)?

I once asked this question of a seminary professor and asked him to put percentages on it. That is, I wondered if our relationship with God was 100% God's doing and we were simply passive (which seemed to me what was meant by justification by grace), or was the relationship 100% our doing with God being passive (which seemed to me to be what was meant by justification by works). I fully expected the professor to give me a mixed percentage – perhaps 70% God's doing and 30% our doing, or even 50/50. Instead, he surprised me and said, "Justification is 100% God's doing and it is 100% our doing. It is a total commitment in both directions." In other words, it is a dialectic.

That in a nutshell is what Paul is saying here. In the first chapters of Galatians Paul has emphasized that our relationship with God is totally God's initiative. Christ has accomplished our salvation once and for all and there is nothing for us to do but to accept this gift in faith.

But in chapters 5 and 6, Paul emphasizes the other side of the dialectic, that God has certain expectations of us and we are responsible to God for our actions. Paul speaks of living according to the "law of love" (5:14) or the "law of Christ" (6:2). He speaks of "being slaves to one another" (5:13) and "bearing one another's burdens". (6:2)

Paul's words, "you reap whatever you sow", could be interpreted as a threat – don't do that or else! But Paul is not using the fact of divine judgment to threaten us or to coerce us into believing or behaving. In all of his writings, Paul consistently looks on the judgment of believers with confidence. The reason for this confidence lies in the identity of the judge on that final day, who is no less than God Incarnate – Jesus the Christ, the same person who gave his life so that we might live.

That does not mean that his judgment on our lives will be a sham, something for which we just go through the motions. The judgment is real, but what's at stake is not the final verdict. We know the verdict. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (8:1) Even though we are guilty of being sinful (sinful both individually and corporately, as we bear responsibility for being part of a sinful society), we have God's promise that we will be declared righteous, "not guilty", because of Jesus Christ.

What is at stake in the final judgment for Christians is to give an accounting of how they have fulfilled the responsibilities God has entrusted to them. Christians will be asked about the integrity of their life in Christ and how their faith has been lived out in their everyday lives.

To say "you reap whatever you sow" is not a threat, but a statement of fact. It reminds us that our actions have consequences, and though our sinful actions may be forgiven, the consequences remain.

A man who abuses his wife or children may be forgiven, but the emotional scars he inflicts on them will be with them the rest of their lives. Men and women who abuse alcohol or other drugs may think their actions are no one's business but their own, but the consequences of lost work time, broken families, traffic deaths, and increased crime leave deep and lasting wounds. The continuing depletion and pollution of the earth's resources are quickly reaching a crisis level. We can ask forgiveness, and God will forgive us, but we and our children and grandchildren will have to live with the consequences.

Paul's sobering words about our actions are a reminder that while we talk about "breaking" God's law, it is, in fact, unbreakable. When we act against God's law and try to break it, we only break ourselves upon it, like a ship breaking up on a coral reef. We cannot presume upon God's grace or take God for granted. We cannot let faith degenerate into mere lip service or the search for warm feelings. We who bear the sign of the cross on our foreheads have been called upon to be obedient in love and faithful in service to all, both inside and outside the Church.

In the final analysis, Paul is not inconsistent here. He proclaims to us a God who is both gracious and righteous, both loving and just. The God who in mercy accepts sinners is the same God who expects his people to be obedient in their freedom, with their faith active in love. (5:6)

Paul sums up the message of freedom in this letter in his concluding words: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision – neither what we do or we don't do – is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God (the church)...May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen."