

## Freed from the Law

### Galatians 5: 1-25

<sup>1</sup> Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.

<sup>2</sup> Look, I, Paul, am telling you that if you have yourselves circumcised, having Christ won't help you. <sup>3</sup> Again I swear to every man who has himself circumcised that he is required to do the whole Law. <sup>4</sup> You people who are trying to be made righteous by the Law have been estranged from Christ. You have fallen away from grace! <sup>5</sup> We eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness through the Spirit by faith. <sup>6</sup> Being circumcised or not being circumcised doesn't matter in Christ Jesus, but faith working through love does matter.

<sup>7</sup> You were running well—who stopped you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup> This line of reasoning doesn't come from the one who calls you. <sup>9</sup> A little yeast works through the whole lump of dough. <sup>10</sup> I'm convinced about you in the Lord that you won't think any other way. But the one who is confusing you will pay the penalty, whoever that may be. <sup>11</sup> Brothers and sisters, if I'm still preaching circumcision, why am I still being harassed? In that case, the offense of the cross would be canceled. <sup>12</sup> I wish that the ones who are upsetting you would castrate themselves!

<sup>13</sup> You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love. <sup>14</sup> All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>15</sup> But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other!

<sup>16</sup> I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. <sup>17</sup> A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. <sup>18</sup> But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law. <sup>19</sup> The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, <sup>21</sup> jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won't inherit God's kingdom.

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires.

<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let's not become arrogant, make each other angry, or be jealous of each other.

This week we are finishing up our conversation on the Ten Commandments. As I said at the beginning of this series, we could have easily spent 10 weeks on these commandments and not covered everything. These ten commandments are so much more than simply words on a plaque. They are statements which guide our words and actions as people of faith. They were never intended to just be a moral code. They were always intended to outline a moral vision of God's Shalom, fully realized here on Earth, a vision where all live-in community, a vision where all realize and embrace their connections to one another. These ten commandments were always intended to be a framework which helps bring about God's Kingdom here on Earth just as it is in Heaven.

However, as we all know, when we live in community, there are a lot of grey areas. That is what happened as the Israelites began to settle in the promise land. Questions began to arise about whether the ten commandments were set in stone or were they a living document which would adapt with the context as the community changed. The people discovered that in the grey areas of life, there

were gaps which the ten commandments did not address. The community needed more conversation, needed more guidance about the Ten Commandments to help them fill in these gaps. So, for example, let's take the fourth commandment, the one about Sabbath. In theory, it is easy, but becomes more complicated when put into practice. People began wondering how far they needed to go to implement this rest from work on the Sabbath day. They began to wonder if I feed my animals on the Sabbath is that considered work? Or am I allowed to get wood for the fire on the Sabbath or is that considered work? The implementing of this commandment along with all the others brought more questions for the community as they began to move away from theory to practicing them in their daily lives. And to help answer these questions, the religious leaders began to determine just what was allowed and what was not allowed. The religious leaders began to fill in the gaps with rules and regulations. The religious leaders began to develop a moral code to lead the people's daily lives.

Unfortunately, what the community discovered is that the downside to these types of conversations is that they can become very legalistic. They can become separated from the intent behind the commandment. Again, this is what happened as the Israelites began to settle in the promise land. Their questions about the grey areas of life soon become transformed into a list of what is needed to be faithful in the community, and any deviation from that list was wrong.

The problem which arose with this is that the moral code which was developed was too cut and dry. It did not help the community fill in the gaps. And worst of all, it set up a balance of power which was largely unfair to those who don't fit those clear-cut labels defined by the system.

Which is why our text from Galatians is so appropriate as we wrap up our conversation about the ten commandments. Paul reminds this community of faith that the Kingdom of God is not about rules and regulations. It is about freeing us so that we can become the people God created and calls us to be. It is about living in community with one another, embracing the grey areas of life, and seeing each other as Beloved Children of God.

If we remember, this community of faith in Galatia were all converts from paganism. They never were under the law of Moses. However, after Paul establishes this church and moves on to another area, other evangelists come and teach the opposite of what Paul had taught this group. These other evangelists said that Paul was wrong, that these new Christians did need to follow the law, especially the whole circumcision part to be followers of Jesus. This community of faith in Galatia is confused. They want to know what they need to do to become followers of Jesus Christ.

To answer their questions, Paul tells them that they have already done what they needed to do. They believe in Jesus. They have taken Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. This act of faith changes everything. They do not need to follow the Law to be people of faith. In fact, following the law pulls them away from their faith. Instead, this community of faith needs to live in the Spirit and work to bring about the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

Now, this may seem like a very paradoxical argument, but for Paul, it is not. Paul realizes that this community of faith in Galatia is looking for the 10 top things they need to do to be believers in Jesus, that if they complete those ten things, mark them off their list, then they are good to go in getting into heaven. Paul tells them faith does not work like that. It is not a list of deeds we can check off when completed. We don't get to pick and choose what we are going to follow. Instead, our faith opens our eyes to see beyond the rules and regulations to the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Paul cautions this community from narrowing down their faith into simply being about right or wrong because when we limit our faith, we limit the work of God. He reminds them that to live in the freedom of the Spirit is to fulfil the whole law which is: to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves because as Paul tells this community of faith in Galatia, there is no law against this.

I wish I could say that these types of legalistic conversations were limited to ancient history. However, I know that is not true. In 2020, we are having some of the exact same legalistic conversations about what is right and what is wrong and who gets to decide this. From religious freedom to the second amendment, to the protests which are happening around our nation, there are differing opinions on what is right and what is wrong in each of these instances. It would be so easy for someone, for our leaders, for our religious institutions to come up with a moral code to help us figure it all out.

Yet, as people of faith, we know that there is nothing cut and dry about living in community with one another. It is messy. It is difficult. It is about listening to each other's stories. It is about knowing that our way is not the only way. Living in community never was and never is about just me and my wants. It has always been about all of us, coming together as one, doing the hard work of reconciliation which goes beyond upholding a cut and dry moral code.

I don't have all the answers but I do know this...As followers of Jesus Christ, we serve someone who defied the laws of this world while also working to build bridges between differing factions. As followers of Jesus Christ, we serve someone who turned the tables over in the Temple when he saw the injustices and hypocrisy there while inviting some of the same religious leaders to break bread

with him. As followers of Jesus Christ, we serve someone whose death marked him as an enemy of the state while it brought new life and freedom to many. One of the greatest lessons Jesus ever taught us as his followers is that life is full of grey areas and it is our calling to wade into the midst of them because in them, is where we find the Kingdom of God. May it be so. Amen.