

Spirit Or Flesh

Galatians 5:2-26

Introduction

Paul has been talking about the slavery that the Jewish Christians were attempting to put the Gentile Christians under. In the opening of this text, Paul showed even more deeply the dangerous ground the Gentile Christians would be on if they were to follow the teaching of the Jewish Christians. Paul then called them to a different kind of slavery, the slavery of loving one another. This is a much deeper level of spirituality than just living according to a set of rituals and rules.

The Only Thing That Counts: 5:2-6

Paul opened this section with an emphatic “Look!” that should probably be heard in a severe tone. The opening word could be understood as “mark my words!” This comes out of Paul’s own personal apostolic authority (“I, Paul”). Although circumcision had been mentioned earlier in the letter, this is the first time that the reader comes to understand that this is the main point of contention for Paul in the letter. It appears that the Gentiles have not yet followed through in complying with the teaching of the opponents, but they are on the verge of doing so.

The ramification of such a decision would be catastrophic spiritually. By embracing circumcision as something necessary to be a true child of Abraham and a Christian, the Gentiles would be trusting law for their relationship with God. The result of trusting in circumcision is described in three ways, (1) Christ will be of no benefit, (2) you will be cut off from Christ, and (3) you have fallen from grace. The sacrifice of Christ would no longer be able to give them life because they would have turned to another source for life – law.

It needs to be understood that practicing circumcision in and of itself was not the issue. Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3). The opponents were teaching the Gentile Christians that circumcision was an essential sign or mark of covenant relationship with God. This was also a call to embrace the Jewish life as a life designed to distinguish them as God’s people to the exclusion of others.

The belief that practicing one commandment made one obligated to keep all the law can be seen in Jewish writings and in James 2:9. For Paul, the only mark of citizenship in the kingdom of God was the cross of Christ. The Gentile Christians had to choose whether they would put their trust in Jewish Law/ritual or in the cross. To seek justification by embracing Jewish law would be a rejection of God's grace. For Paul it was always either law (or identity markers) or promise and grace. These are mutually exclusive.

The Spirit is the alternative to law and will be addressed more fully in the next section. Paul again stressed their common experience with the Spirit (3:1ff). Their deliverance came through Abrahamic-like faith that trusted in God. Those who looked to circumcision and food laws for righteousness were short sighted. The word translated "eagerly wait" is used by Paul to speak of the future coming of Christ (Rom 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Phil 3:20). At that time God's glory will be revealed as never before, and righteousness will be fully realized. Such categories of identification as circumcision will not exist in the world to come, and they are not to exist in the here and now.

The "hope of righteousness" probably carries the same meaning as Habakkuk 2:4 and Romans 1:17. The Septuagint (Greek version of OT) translates the Habakkuk text, "the righteous one out of (God's) faithfulness shall live." The Romans text probably better reads, "The Righteous One will live based on his (God's) faithfulness." This righteousness probably speaks of Jesus, the Righteous One who is our hope. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Disciples eagerly wait for the return of our hope, the Righteous One, Jesus. Our hope is not founding religious rituals like circumcision or taking the Lord's Supper every week. It is founding Christ.

The new reality that transcends this world and mirrors the world to come is the realm of "faith working through love." Paul's gospel does not lead to a selfish "do your own thing" or lawlessness life as Paul's opponents would have charged. The crucified Christ leads his followers to a place no law can take you. It leads to a life of sacrificial love for others. Paul will expand on this later in this letter.

You Were Running Well: 5:7-12

From the time Paul left Galatia until the Jewish Christians arrived, the Galatia Christians had been growing in their faith. But the Jewish Christians had put an obstacle in their path. The metaphor Paul used here is that of running a race. The Galatians were like a runner who had had someone cut in front of them (NIV: “Who cut in on you?”) causing them to lose their stride. There is another interesting possibility here. It may be a play on words. Those who had demanded the cutting of flesh (circumcision) had “cut” themselves off. As a result the Galatia Christians were no longer persuaded about the truth of the gospel. Truth here is not some abstract concept. In this context “truth” is the community life that trusts only in Christ and that has no boundaries of division such as circumcision or food laws. It is a life that participates in the gospel (all that the life and death of Christ entails).

Paul’s opponents did not have divine authority from God (the one who called them). Their teaching was a very subtle form of corruption (yeast) but the results, if followed, would be devastating. As Paul had called on the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:6), the implication is that they should remove the corrupting influence. Like a parent who expects positive remarks to result in appropriate actions on the part of the child, Paul told them he was confident they would do the right thing. They should also understand that those attempting to confuse them would eventually pay the price for what they were doing.

It appears from verse 11 that the opponents were charging Paul with preaching circumcision in other places and therefore, he was not preaching the whole gospel to the Gentiles. As stated earlier, Paul did circumcise Timothy (Acts 16:3). The opponents may have used this, or they may have been bringing purely false accusations against Paul. Paul’s defense was that if he had been preaching circumcision in other places, why were his opponents persecuting him? In 1 Corinthians 1:18ff, Paul spoke of the cross as offensive to the Jews and foolish to Gentiles. If he had preached circumcision the offensive nature of the cross would have been removed.

Paul then fired off a sharp barb against his opponents teaching on circumcision. Verse 12 is translated in basically one of two ways. Some have seen the phrase as saying that Paul wished the opponents would cut themselves off from the Galatia

church. The most common translation goes along the line of “castrate” or “mutilate.” Such a statement shows how passionate Paul was to counter the charge the opponents were making against him and his passion to debunk their teaching. Both understandings play against the opponent’s teaching of circumcision.

Slaves to One Another: 5:13-15

It is not always easy following Paul’s thoughts. There is some question as to whether these three verses start the next section or take up where Paul left off in verse 6 and serve as an introduction to 5:15-6:10. This document will go with the latter.

It was not uncommon for Paul’s critics to accuse him of leaving people with no moral guide for their life. His opponents in Rome (Rom. 6:1) responded with, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” This was a ridiculous response to the gospel. Paul never viewed Christian freedom as an “opportunity.” This word was originally used for a base of a military operation and later used to speak of the resources needed to carry out an undertaking. Here it is the resources for the flesh to fulfill its passions. The NIV reads “sinful nature” and the NRSV reads “self-indulgence.” The word is literally “flesh” which speaks of people’s weakness or inability to deal with the temptation that Satan brings into our lives. The NIV “sinful nature” shows a Calvinistic bias that is unbiblical. Here, as well as in Romans, Paul contrasts “flesh” and Spirit” as two influences people have at their disposal to direct the path of their lives. There are two probable understandings of “flesh” in Romans. One is the weakness and corruptibility of humanity living in the fleshly form. Humanity’s fleshly nature is powerless to overcome selfish passions. Two is the connection to the nationalistic Jewish teacher and his understanding of circumcision of the flesh. Circumcision was not only one of those markers in which the nationalistic teacher boasted; it was also seen as a deterrent to sexual sins. Neither the law nor circumcision had, as the nationalistic Jewish teacher thought, the power to overcome Sin. Not only were the law and circumcision unable to control sin, one’s own human weakness was unable to control sin.

Paul’s response is that the gospel calls people to a life of love and servitude toward one another, not licentiousness. Paul was so concerned about divisions within

Christianity that his opponents were propagating that he did not even mention the usual companion command to love God. By using the OT as the scripture that still speaks to Christians, Paul showed he was not anti-Torah. He was against his opponent's misinterpretation of Torah.

This begins a lengthy discussion about community relationships. Christians are free from things that build walls of exclusion (circumcision, pride, jealousy, bitterness, resentment, etc.) so they can build community with one another and be instruments of reconciliation to the world. This was and is the posture of their savior. The idea of slavery would have sounded just as odd in Paul's day as it does today. Freedom and slavery seem to be mutually exclusive, but not so with Christians. It all depends on why you are a slave and depends on whom you serve. Christians freely choose to follow the path of Jesus, a path of sacrifice for others. It is their free choice to live a life designed to bless others rather than pursuing selfish goals.

There is also a difference between doing the law and fulfilling the law. The word translated "summed up" in the NIV and NRSV really means, "to fill" or "fulfill." Fulfill does not mean replace (the law). It rather carries the idea of bringing to fulfillment or living the intended meaning of something.

The Jews started with 600 or so commandments from the OT and added hundreds more laws in order to build a fence around them so they would not break any laws. This can be seen in the way they tried to define in detail what it meant to break the Sabbath. When Jesus came, he challenged the Jews for having more concern about not working on the Sabbath than helping someone. He was upset with the way they were more concerned with drinking out of clean cups than being greedy on the inside (Luke 11:39). The Jews had lost touch with the intent of the laws. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the real intent of the law. You do not just abstain from killing someone; you abstain from anger (Matt. 5:12-24). If you refrained from killing but harbored bitterness, the sense of community was destroyed. Longnecker (pg. 243) quoting Westerholm states, "When one loves one's neighbor, the whole law is fully satisfied in the process." Paul is saying that the law finds its central meaning in Leviticus 19:18. Being identified as covenant people of God does not come from circumcision or food laws. It comes from the greatest expression of love for one's

neighbor, from their union with the crucified Christ. A similar concept is found in Hosea 6:6. "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

But what was going on in Galatia was anything but building a sense of community. Walls of separation were being built through circumcision and food laws. They were in a dogfight with one another that was leading to internal destruction. Our own history ought to teach us that the more laws we try to come up with to identify us as distinct from others, the more division we have within our own community.

Introduction

Not only was there a question as to how one became a child of Abraham and therefore a child of promise; there was a question concerning what factors would give moral guidance or would curb sinful impulses. The opponents of the gospel proposed law and circumcision to be the answer. The only other alternative they could comprehend was a life that would be consumed by the pursuit of selfish endeavors. Paul saw another option, that of opening one's life to the guidance of the Spirit of God.

Spirit vs. Flesh: 5:16-18

In deference to his opponents, Paul believed the Spirit of God (not law) is the answer to the charges that his gospel had nothing to battle the impulses that are against God's will. Paul had already reminded the Galatians that they possess the Spirit (3:1ff). That same Spirit is the answer to the dilemma of how a person can live a holy life.

While the NIV and NRSV translate the opening with "live," a more accurate translation would be "walk." Although not recognizable in English, (Hayes, pg. 325) it is based on a Hebrew idiom that spoke of a certain way of conducting one's life. "Walk" more accurately expresses the idiomatic aspect of the word. It is used in the OT to speak of walking in God's law or statutes. Two of many examples that could be cited are Exodus 16:4 where the NRSV translates it "*follow* my instruction" and Jeremiah 44:23 where it is translated "*walk* in his law ...". Paul frequently used this word (Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 4:2; Eph 4:17; Phil 3:17; Col 2:6; and many others). It is the root of another Hebrew word that, in Jewish tradition, spoke of the compliance with law in one's

daily life. Paul's use of the idiom "walk" may also have a particular purpose in this letter. This, according to Dunn (pg. 295), was not an expression used in Greek thought. So this may very well have been directly aimed at Paul's Jewish opponents who were familiar with the idiom and would have associated it with the law.

The word "gratifies" means to "carry out" or "bring to completion." The NIV and NRSV have two very different ways of translating verse 16. The NIV reads as a promise, "Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." The NRSV reads as a command, "Live by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." The NIV is to be preferred, not only on the basis of grammar; but more importantly on the basis of the theology of Galatians. Christians are given a promise of blessings they will receive if they live by the Spirit. In this case the promise is freedom from the desires of the flesh. Hayes (pg. 325) gives the translation, "If you walk by the Spirit you will never carry out the desires of the flesh." In fact, there is a double negative in the text ("not not"). This is what Hayes calls an "emphatic negative of a future possibility." The promise is conditioned on a person's willingness to "walk by the Spirit." The word "walk" or "live" is in the active imperative mode. For the Galatians, they must choose whether they continue to walk by the Spirit or want to walk by the law.

There is a battle that goes on between the flesh and the Spirit. "The "flesh" is a comprehensive term for the sphere of autonomous fallen humanity, conceived as standing in opposition to God (Hayes, pg. 326)." "Spirit" is the Spirit of God who was sent after the cross and resurrection to oppose the flesh. The end of verse 17 gives the purpose of both of these entities. When a Christian desires to live by the flesh there is opposition from the Spirit. When a Christian desires to live by the Spirit there is opposition from the flesh. The goal of both is to get the Christian to do what she/he does not want to do. There are times Christians do not want to live by the flesh and times they do not want to live by the Spirit.

If someone chooses to live by the Spirit, the Spirit will lead him/her into a different sphere of life. The opponents saw law and circumcision as the answer to spiritual life and direction. Paul called for a law that is written on the heart (Jer. 31:33-34) or a circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:6). "What is needed (Dunn, pg. 300) is the Spirit, or, alternatively expressed, the law written within to provide an inner drive of greater and

more enduring strength, the supplanting of one motive centre (selfish desire) by another of greater power (the Spirit).” The answer to life is not found in a written code or from outward constraint.

The Contrasting Life Is Obvious: 5:19-26

Law is not required for people to understand the battle between flesh and Spirit or to understand the difference between right and wrong. The works of the flesh become obvious when life is seen through the life and death of Jesus and when being led by the Spirit. There is a bigger issue at stake than just the here and now. This all relates to being an heir of the eschatological blessings promised to the heirs of Abraham (chaps. 3-4). Those who walk by the flesh will not inherit the promises. Paul’s opponents would have said circumcision was necessary to inherit the promises.

Composing a list of virtues and vices was common before and during Paul’s time. It can be seen in the statement, “and things like these,” that this is not a comprehensive list. The first three works of the flesh are sexual offenses. Paul’s world could be described as lawless chaos when it came to sexuality. The 21st century does not have the market on such things. The second two are practices of idolatry. “Sorcery” speaks of occult magical practices. It is the word from which we get our word “pharmaceutical.” Hayes describes the last two (pg. 327) as self-indulgent partying. An interesting aspect of this list is that the middle eight involve behaviors that create dissention and factions within the community of faith. Later in verse 26 Paul warned the Galatia church of disharmony within the community.

In contrast to the works of the flesh is the fruit of the Spirit. Paul is making a point even in the wording of the two phrases. By not saying “work of the Spirit” Paul is making a point that the fruit of the Spirit is in opposition to human effort. The fruit of the Spirit is in line with the birth of Isaac. It is a gift of God. As with the works of the flesh, this is not a comprehensive list. Here are some brief comments about some of the fruits of the Spirit.

Love: In the LXX this word for love is used to speak of God’s love. It has already played a big role in Galatians 5 (vv. 6, 13, 14).

Joy: A common word associated with happiness in Paul's world. From a Christian perspective it is not necessarily associated with happy circumstances.

Peace: In the Greek world often thought of as the absence of pain, but among Jews it had a more positive connotation. Longnecker (pg. 216) defines it as, "everything that makes for a person's highest good and that promotes the best relationships." An important aspect of this definition is the relationship aspect. It is an attribute of God (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11).

Patience: A response when faced with being wronged (2 Cor. 6:6; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12). In the LXX, it is used to describe an attribute of God (Exod. 34:6; Ps. 103:8) and in the NT the attitude of God and Jesus toward people (Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Tim. 1:16).

Faithfulness: It is the same word as used in 3:8 and 2:16. Faithfulness in the life of a Christian is evidence of God's Spirit.

Self-control: Often this is seen as something that people have to do on their own. Christians may struggle for years with a sin and become frustrated because they make no positive gain. Maybe that is because they are trying to do it on their own rather than relying on the Spirit of God.

These words are not just qualities related to individuals. A major concern of Paul's was the impact of the Spirit in the life of the community of faith. These characteristics are also not to be considered as another set of laws. In fact, there is no law against such things. This statement is somewhat difficult to understand. It could mean that there is no law against the fruits of the Spirit. Or it could be saying very much the same as the statement in verse 18 (see those notes). What the Spirit sets out to produce in the life of a Christian goes beyond the requirements of the law. The Spirit changes hearts not just outward behavior.

When the Galatia Christians chose to identify with Christ and began the journey of being led by the Spirit, their lives moved to a new reality. The only way Christ could destroy the power of the "present evil age" (1:4) was through crucifixion. Identifying with Christ (sharing in his suffering and death) calls Christians to do the same to their destructive fleshly passions by crucifying it in their lives. Their lives are then open to the

leading of the Spirit, and God promises in such circumstances that the Spirit will produce Christ-like fruit in their lives. They then cannot live a self-indulgent life. As stated earlier, it is no longer the Christian who lives but it is Christ living in them (Gal. 2:19-20). There is then a new age in which they live. One pointed toward the age to come when Jesus returns – a new age in which they are led by the Spirit and not the passions of the flesh.

Calling again upon the Galatian's experience of having received the Spirit ("If we walk by the Spirit), Paul reminds them of their obligation to ("be guided by") keep in step with or agree with the Spirit. "Guided by" in the second half of verse 25 is used in Romans 4:12 of walking in the footsteps of another. If followed, the Spirit gives direction of life.

This whole section is about the Spirit's life in the faith community. Walking by the Spirit does not lead to certain things. The Spirit does not lead a community to conceit, to provoking one another, or to envying one another. Those who embrace the nature of the Spirit are not rivals. The use of "one another" twice in verse 26 makes an emphatic statement as to the importance God places on relationships within the community of faith.

Conclusion

Putting one's trust in such things as law and in particular circumcision does not create or maintain covenant relationship with God. In fact, it makes life with God impossible. Wrongly placed trust also removes the eager anticipation of Christ's return. Life only comes from trust in Christ Jesus. Although churches today do not deal with circumcision, there are other things that we can put in its place that can be just as anti-gospel as circumcision. It seems we have tended to be more concerned about "liberalism" than a legalistic application of scripture. This text certainly gives a strong warning against any religious activity that in any way is believed to merit favored status with God. We have favored status if we trust in the faithfulness of Jesus. It comes as a result of God's choosing not our activity. This text also warns us against binding traditions on others and gloating about being faithful to God while the community of faith is being broken apart.

The gospel does not promote a licentious life. Understanding the intent of God's commands through the event of the cross draws disciples a life of sacrifice for the sake of others. True discipleship is a more committed life of obedience because it comes from the heart not from the letter of the law.

Law, religious ritual, or tradition does not empower disciples to live a faithful and loving life. We are all weak (fleshly) and unable to deal with the temptation of sin on our own. The answer to our weakness is not law. The answer is the transforming power of God's Spirit. We have a choice whether we pursue the influence of the flesh or pursue the influence of the Spirit. The flesh leads to destructive behaviors that destroy community life. The Spirit leads us to a life of love and community.

Points to Be Made:

1. Putting trust in anything other than the faithfulness of God does not bring the blessings that God's promise and grace provide. If blessings are sought through anything other than God, we need to be willing to accept what blessings those things can bring, which is really nothing of eternal value.
2. We can only deal with our fleshly sinful desires by relying on the Spirit of God. Law, ritual, or tradition has no power over such things.
3. A transformed life is not just about an individual's salvation. It has Christian community implications. If there is division among God's people, it is because people are putting their trust in something other than the faithfulness of God and the transforming power of the Spirit.