

GALATIANS 4: 12 - 6: 18

As Paul moves to the last part of his letter, he expresses himself more personally and practically.

4: 12 - 20

Paul speaks personally about his relationship with the Galatian believers. He is deeply disappointed and hurt that they have strayed from his teaching and become influenced by the circumcision faction. They were once so tender and caring for him. Now they have turned away from him, causing him to feel that he must begin all over again with them (pains of childbirth imagery).

4: 21 - 5:1

Paul undertakes some creative exegesis of the story of the two sons of Abraham found in Genesis. One son, Ishmael, was fathered illegitimately, while the other, Isaac, was fathered with Sarah. Somehow, Paul links Ishmael with the Mosaic law of Sinai, and Isaac, with the promise of faith leading up to Christ and his Spirit. The law is connected to the flesh and the promise of faith with the Spirit. Not that the law is immoral. Rather, the law regulates immorality but has no power to transform the human heart against immorality. Only faith in Christ and the gift of Christ's Spirit can do that.

5:2 - 15

Paul now contrasts the law of Moses (symbolized by circumcision) to the law of faith or the law of Christ. If Christ has won salvation for us by his faithfulness and we follow him, his Spirit lives in us and works concretely in us. Freedom from the law's ceremonial demands (i.e. circumcision, fasting, etc) is not an excuse to be freed from ethical demands. No. In fact, the law of Christ is more demanding still, but it works in a different way. It doesn't stipulate external requirements and then demand adherence externally (what we do vs how we feel or what we think). Rather, it works from the inside to mould and shape us toward obedience to God, which then has external characteristics (transformed heart, spirit and mind lead to behaviour influenced by love). Thus, 'Circumcision or uncircumcision' is not the real focal point, but rather, 'faith working through love.' Love is the fulfilment of the law in the deepest, widest sense. The question is: what does love as Jesus lived and died it, demand?

Love is not freedom for the sake of freedom. Rather, as Paul has written elsewhere, if we are not slaves to God, we are slaves of sin or the world or the law. Thus, love is the freedom to become servants or 'slaves' of God, and therefore of what love demands in relation to others. Paul is concerned that the teaching of the circumcision faction has introduced distinctions among believers, and therefore, divisions and conflict, threatening to rupture the unity and fellowship of the churches as a whole. Freedom is not an excuse for indulgence without consequence. Rather, it is an invitation for mutual responsibility in love.

5:16 - 6:18

The 'works of the flesh' Paul lists are focussed on deeds and attitudes that sow discord and division within families and communities, be they social or sexual. In contrast, the 'fruit of the Spirit' is focussed on love's work of building greater unity based on humility and openness to the needs and realities of others. Love demands restraint (self-control) as much as kindness and generosity. Patience is also related to self-control in dealing with others and gentleness is about being honest, but in a way that respects where another person is and what he/she can handle. Joy is something that can only exist when one's conscience is free, and one feels true friendship with those around. Love is the crowning virtue and sustains all the others.

Paul concludes by encouraging them to sort out their difficulties, now that discord has set in. The truth must be spoken and served, however, those spoken to and confronted must also be cared for. Their burdens must be carried, but not without allowing them to carry their own load. Removing a person's responsibility from them is not a service of compassion but an undermining of their character formation as adults.

Finally, Paul speaks about the new creation. Just as God created the world out of nothing, God is recreating human hearts and lives by the power of Christ's Spirit, based on the costly love of God in the Crucified Christ. The cost of love as forgiveness is high. But love is such that it pays the price. The world no longer has a hold on Paul, as much as he has both feet planted in it. Sin does instigate trouble, but it doesn't dominate his life, nor does it distort his judgement. In so far as he carries Christ's suffering in his body, he looks toward the resurrection as his destiny, a destiny already begun in him by the rebirth of his spirit through the Spirit.

What about you?