

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Free For All

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

Galatians 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. 13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

DIAGNOSIS: Yoked in Slavery

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Works of the Flesh*

Any parent knows that the old adage remains ever true: “Give ‘em an inch, and they’ll take a mile.” Give a child choice, and she is likely to abuse her freedom. But abusing one’s freedom is not just child’s play. We adults like to do it too. We call it “free choice” when we do as we choose without regard for the consequences. Using modern terms, Paul might have called such license a “free for all.” Paul recognized the human penchant to abuse freedom. That’s why he warned the Galatians: “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence” (v. 13). Paul was not naive or Pollyanna; he knew that his listeners would be tempted to treat the Gospel of Christ as license to sin. So he directed his words to the Christians in Galatia—people who already had heard the good news of Jesus Christ. After all, even we Christians have to admit, it is enticing to “bite and devour one another” (v. 14), and it is almost always delightful to “gratify the desires of the flesh” (v. 16). As Luther admits in his commentary on Galatians: “the surer we are of the liberty purchased for us by Christ, the more we neglect the Word, prayer, well-doing, and suffering” (Luther’s Commentary on Galatians, translated by Theodore Graebner, p. 214).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Opposing the Spirit*

Interestingly, among the obvious works of the flesh—fornication, jealousy, anger, drunkenness, and the like—Paul couches a more troublesome work: idolatry (v. 19). Trusting in anything that is

not God (and, more particularly, God revealed in Jesus Christ) is idol (idle?) worship. Idolatry is “what the flesh desires,” and, Paul says, what the flesh desires “is opposed to the Spirit” (v. 17). Love what you accomplish by your own flesh (whether it is moral or immoral) and you are an idolater. Desire anything that is not of Christ and you are opposed to the Spirit.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Disinherited*

And when you oppose the Spirit, when you trust what is not Christ, you are disinherited. For, as Paul warns in verse 21, “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” And to be outside the kingdom is to be eternally yoked (a slave) to sin and death.

PROGNOSIS: Freed by Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Inheritors*

But Christ has broken the yoke of slavery and set us free (v. 1). Because Christ took the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7), we are not disinherited. Instead, we receive all the gifts that accompany a lasting relationship with God: forgiveness, life, and salvation. We inherit the kingdom, not because we “desire” it (“deciding for Christ” is merely another work of the flesh), but because God freely chooses to give it to us. We are truly freed by Christ (v. 1). Give God an inch, and God takes a mile—blessing sinners not just with forgiveness but freed consciences and hearts, and the treasure of the kingdom.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Opposing the Flesh*

Set free by Christ and kingdom-bound, the faithful “stand firm,” yoking ourselves to Christ only (v. 1). Because we belong to Christ, we hear the call to freedom (v. 13), and accept that our flesh (with its passions and desires) needs to be crucified (v. 24). In fact, we faithful even take a second look at the most

laudable of our fleshly desires, measuring them according to what the Spirit desires, because “what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh” (v. 17).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Fruit of the Spirit*

Free, we co-inheritors with Christ, use our freedom (ironically) as an opportunity to be subject to others. We make others the objects of our attention and subject ourselves in love to them (v. 13). We know that the law cannot bind our consciences (v. 18), and so we willingly submit to the law’s summary purpose, to “love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 14). Led by the Spirit, we grow (but never take credit for the work of growing) in the fruit of the Spirit: We practice love, peace, patience, joy, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (v. 22). And we thank Christ that, while we are merely “practicing” these fruits, he fully ripened in them for our sake, so that we might be free for all.