

## **Galatians 5:13-26**

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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 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.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

### **Freedom from Sin**

To begin I'd like everyone to come to the front four pews. Make room for people to sit next to you. Come forward and sit next to someone, perhaps someone you don't like so much, and I think we can be honest here; there are people that you might not like very much, and that may be one reason why we are so spread out in this sanctuary, but Paul's lesson today about coming together, not just in body but in Spirit, and I want you to be together to hear this message.

I'd like to illustrate to you one of the advantages of people coming together, and since tomorrow is Memorial Day, I'd like to use a military example, a battle that occurred over 2000 years ago. It was the Battle of Marathon, in 490 BC. It's an appropriate example, because one of the main principles that lead men and women to put their lives on the line for this country is the principle of democracy, that we the people determine our leaders and choose our policies. That principle of democracy was born in Greece and it was a huge factor in the decision of the city of Athens to resist a huge invading army at the risk of death rather than just surrendering and taking their chances with a dictator. The superpower of that day and age was Persia, and in 490 BC their army was poised to invade Greece. Sparta had a well-trained army – in Sparta you started military training at birth – but as tough as Sparta was, the leaders knew that they could not hold back an invading force that was ten times its size, so they appealed to the people of Athens, who were in a similar bind knowing that they alone could not resist a Persian invasion. And so they united to defend Greece, which they successfully did, against a force that was over three times larger than theirs.

But it wasn't the fact that the two city-states of Athens and Sparta united, and it wasn't just their passion for democracy that inspired them to fight bravely that enabled them to win the battle of Marathon; they were still outnumbered three to one, and many a democratic nation has fallen to foreign armies of greater strength. It was a military tactic called a **phalanx** that really won the battle. The phalanx was the predecessor of the tank. Soldiers marched side by side in a rectangular formation with their shields touching, and by being so close to one another with their shields pressing against one another, they were able to protect one another. And their spears would be extended between the shields to kill or drive off the enemy, and with this tactic a smaller force was able to defeat a much larger one because they were united and coordinated.

And so the freedom that we enjoy as a nation owes a debt of gratitude to a few thousand Greek soldiers who successfully defended their democracy – their self-rule – from the threat of dictatorship. And yet the freedom that we enjoy as Christians, the

kind of freedom that Paul is describing in our scripture passage today, is a much more important freedom, a much more satisfying freedom than the freedoms that our American Constitution defend – freedom of speech and freedom of press and freedom of thought. What is the freedom that Paul is talking about? He is talking about freedom **from** sin, which is freedom **to** love. Love binds us together; sin tears us apart. And if the church is going to defend that freedom we have to stick together and fight together to preserve that freedom.

What are the qualities of love, and what are those of sin? Love means living in the Spirit while sin means living in the flesh. And Paul gets very specific about what living in the flesh looks like. We sometimes think of “living in the flesh” as relating to our physical lust, which is certainly sin, but that is a bit too narrow an understanding; living in the flesh according to Paul is about living to please yourself, whether it be pleasing your physical passions or pleasing your own ego, and it’s obvious that when you’re living according to the flesh you immediately come into conflict with other people who are living according to the flesh. One of the reasons so many “happy” marriages end in divorce is because the marriage was based on physical passion where both parties were “taking” from the other to satisfy their sexual desires, but when one person wants something different from what the other wants, the marriage falls apart. The marriage was never founded on love but rather on a mutual lust, and that only works when both parties get what they want from the other. When you look at the list that Paul calls “the works of the flesh” church folks may say that generally speaking they’re pretty good at avoiding the first five items: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, and sorcery, though broadly speaking many church folks are idolatrous without even being aware of it. BUT LOOK AT THE NEXT EIGHT ITEMS on the list - enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy. Hmmm. Does that ever happen among church folks? Drunkenness and carousing are not nearly as bad as enmity between people, and those eight middle sins - enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy – are ultimately the result of idolatry. That’s right, making false idols, and the idol that most people worship is THEMSELVES. One of the

reasons why the Church can't seem to come together on important social issues is that people are really looking out for their own interests and claiming that it's God's interest when in fact it isn't. And it's the same reason why individual churches fail as well – because they cannot unite because there are too many egos who want to do things their way, and they bump into other egos that want to do things differently.

Sometimes it's a little more complicated than that. Sometimes individuals really WANT to do what is right for the church but they do it in such a way as to injure, hurt, shame, insult, or belittle other people. Those people have big problems and yet don't know it because their ego defenses are so formidable that they never become aware of the hurt they inflict on others. The real tragedy is that others see this sickness while those who are sick remain oblivious to their sickness, and the anger is so profound that even those closest to them are afraid to confront them on the issue for fear that they'll be attacked. The point is that ego-defense is a work of the flesh that leads to division in the body of Christ, and division causes weakness.

But look at the fruit of the Spirit that Paul describes in the next paragraph: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Some folks think that those first three will just come to them if they believe in Jesus Christ, but you don't just experience love, joy, and peace when you profess faith; it takes some work to get there. You have to practice patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But good luck with being patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled without first being HUMBLE, without dropping those ego defenses that prompt you to boast or put other people down as a way to raise yourself up. You need to cast the eye inward and repent of your sickness if you expect to be healed and actually experience the peace and joy and love that comes from God.

So I want to invite you to repent, in the interest of the church, and in the interest of your own soul. I don't want you to be thinking now, "Well that person really should repent; your focus needs to be

on yourself. My focus needs to be on MY self. Trust that God is working with the people sitting close to you to love you and accept you as you are, and that they are also there to help you with whatever issue you may be dealing with. Don't just tell yourself that it's their problem and not yours. We all have work to do to become better disciples. We all have work to do to become a better church. Let us trust in one another to accept one another without judging one another, to cast our critical eye inward at that ego that is blinds us to our own folly, and to extend grace to each other, and to stand united in our endeavor to exalt Christ who has freed us from sin.