

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – June 30, 2019

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the NRSV on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Galatians 5:1, 13-25

(From *Homiletics*; “Passion Fruit”, June 30, 2019)

The way in which the lectionary chooses the verses from Galatians 5 for this week’s epistle lesson highlights an ironic tension that runs through Paul’s argument in this portion of his letter. Having boldly proclaimed that Christ’s purpose was to free us for the sake of freedom and commanding his readers to firmly resist any attempts to once again subject themselves “to a yoke of slavery” (v. 1), Paul himself then defines this “freedom” to which they have been called as becoming “slaves to one another” (v. 13). Freedom is not to be “an opportunity for self-indulgence” (σαρξ, translated by the NRSV elsewhere in this passage as “the flesh”) but rather an opportunity to turn outward toward others “through love.” Although he does not here explicitly use the image of being “slaves” of Christ found elsewhere in his letters, Paul does hint at it near the end of the reading. There he links believers to Christ by an expression employing the genitive case (οἱ ... τοῦ Χριστοῦ) — a grammatical case that can indicate both the idea of *sharing* in the qualities of Christ (the “genitive of description”) as well as *owning* (the “genitive of possession”), the qualities of Christ. Thus, the NRSV’s translation, “those who belong to Christ.” How is it that fulfilling the purpose of freeing us for the very sake of freedom can result in our being enslaved not only to our deliverer but to all others as well?

For Paul, “freedom” isn’t the opposite of “slavery” but rather a matter of what or whom one serves. Although many would define freedom as following one’s own desires, Paul argues that “the desires of the flesh” (v. 16) or “self-indulgence” (as the word was translated in v. 13) drives one into a vicious cycle where persons “devour one another” and in the end are “consumed by one another” (v. 15). Compulsively engaging in such behaviors can never be “freedom.” Rather than freedom being found in a state of such lawlessness, Paul contends that it can be found only when one acts in accord with the law summarized by the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 14). Truly free acts occur when one considers not only the self but also others, or, even more specifically, the Other, for it is those who “live by the Spirit” who “do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (v. 16). The one who is truly free serves not just the self but also the Other of the Spirit and the others who are one’s neighbors.

There are, then, two competing masters who strive to control us — “the Spirit” and “the flesh” — and they are totally “opposed to each other” (v. 17). While some might think it’s the external master of the Spirit that would constrain individual freedom, Paul argues that just the opposite is true. It’s “the flesh” / “self-indulgence” that actually will “prevent you from doing what you want” (cf. Romans 7:7-25a). But the proof of Paul’s argument depends on drawing out a particular inference from his summary of the law. If you are to “love your neighbor as yourself,” then what you must truly desire at the deepest level for yourself is loving and good things. Freedom, then, is the ability to act in such a way as to obtain those loving and good things. So which master is it, then, that compels behaviors that demonstrate love for one’s self — “the Spirit” or “the flesh”?

It is in answer to that implicit question that Paul lays out the contrasting effects of being mastered by “the flesh” or by “the Spirit.” The outcomes or effects of acting out of “self-indulgence,” here described as “the works of the flesh” (v. 19), are illustrated by a list of vices that were as readily conceived as destructive in Paul’s culture as in ours. These include such things as sexual abuse of others, “strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels” — the list could just go on and on (see vv. 19-21). By contrast, the effects, or here “fruit,” of acting out of obedience to the Spirit are the just as readily recognizable virtues including such things as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,” and perhaps not coincidentally at the end of Paul’s list, “self-control” (vv. 22-23). “There is no law against such things” precisely because these are the things that result when one fulfills “the whole law” by “loving your neighbor as yourself.” Moreover, these are the things that we truly want for ourselves, the things we would do if we were truly “free.” But as “fruit of the Spirit,” they are also things that can be obtained only by those “led by the Spirit.”

When Paul states that those who are “led by the Spirit ... are not subject to the law” (v. 18), he introduces yet another irony: “Fulfilling the whole law” by “loving your neighbor as yourself” in response to the “leading of the Spirit” frees one from being “subject to the law.” Paul can use the word law (νομος) either positively or negatively. When he stated in verse 14 that the love command summarizes “the whole law,” he clearly used the word in a positive sense. Most likely his usage there corresponds to the use of the Hebrew word *torah* within Judaism to refer to the “instruction” God provides through the Scriptures regarding how to live in relationship with the Divine, other people and all of creation. Contrast this positive assessment of “law” to his use of the word in verse 18 to identify the “desires of the flesh” to which we shouldn’t subject ourselves.

Within the context of Galatians, scholars have traditionally labeled this negative use of “law” as nomianism, a desire to make oneself acceptable before God. For Paul, such a desire is nothing other than the “self-indulgence” that he calls “the flesh.” If one’s focus in observing God’s gracious “instruction” is exclusively to secure blessings for one’s self rather than to be in just and loving relationship with God, others and the whole of creation, then one is ultimately following one’s own “desires” rather than being “led by the Spirit,” who is the revealer of God’s “instruction,” *torah*, “the whole law.”

Belonging to Christ (v. 24) as a slave belongs to a master is ironically the means of our liberation in Christ (v. 1). “Freedom” is ultimately found not in independence of the self but in loving relationship with God, through which the Spirit leads us to loving acts toward others.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for this text (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Galatians 5:1, 13-25

- 1.** It is always a good idea to read the verses that are “cut out” from any scripture reading (as well as those before and after). Context matters! But Galatians 5:2-12 are most enlightening. Not only do they give the context of the conflict into which Paul was speaking (the need for circumcision and other legal observances of Torah), they also bring a significantly different tone to this passage – to the point that Paul even advocates self-castration for his opponents (v. 12)! So what do you make of the lectionary reading, in comparison to the verses it leaves out? Does it change the reading of the text? Would you say that Paul was “practicing what he was preaching?” Put another way, does his “campaign rhetoric” in answering his opponents match his stated “platform” of growing Spiritual fruit?
- 2.** What is Paul’s primary concern in this passage? Keeping new believers from following false teachings (e.g. the need to be circumcised)? Answering a charge of moral laxness coming from the advocates of circumcision? Steering readers/hearers away from the works of the flesh (vv. 16-21)? Calling believers to be bearers of spiritual fruit (vv. 22-25)? Seeking/maintaining the unity of the community he established in the midst of conflict? Protecting the spiritual freedom of his readers/hearers from a threat of a new spiritual enslavement? Something else?
- 3.** Consider these questions from Alicia Vargas, *workingpreacher.org* (June 26, 2016): *“How much difference do our Christian faith and the Spirit of Christ make to our communal life within the Christian community? How do they affect our lives “out in the world”? Do we avail ourselves sufficiently of God’s gift in Christ of the fruit of the Spirit, steadfastly resisting the works of the flesh both within and without?”*
- 4.** Again from Alicia Vargas: *“The NRSV’s translation “self-indulgence” is particularly helpful in clarifying the meaning of Paul’s quoted passage from Leviticus 19. How well do we love ourselves and exercise the fruit of the Spirit in our internal relationship with and to ourselves -- substituting self-love for self-indulgence? How well do we refuse to be coopted by and seek alternative patterns of living to the domination system and its encouragement of self-interest? And does that self-love serve as the basis for neighbor-love which builds up the Christian community and enables us to “bear one another’s burdens”?”*

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?