

A Different Look at Sin
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Galatians 5:1, 13-25

We've been reading Galatians now for all of June and I've only spent a little time on this letter. I have often said that the letter that Paul wrote that most speaks to our world is First Corinthians. However as I've been looking at Galatians this month, there is much that can be directed at us as well. Paul is faced with a conflict between his open door and their limited definition of who can be a follower of Christ.

Now remember as I said, Paul is upset with them. There was a group of early Christians about which we know very little. Some speculation is that they may have been zealots who were all in favor of purifying the temple worship just as Jesus had called for, but would have been totally opposed to Gentiles being admitted without being circumcised. What we do know for certain is that the argument was with those who wanted to demand a strict adherence to the law as required for salvation. In today's world we would call them fundamentalists.

By the way fundamentalist is a term that is misused constantly. Fundamentalism came about in the early 1900 and there are 5 fundamentals that you had to believe or you were not Christian. In case your interested I'm not a Christian according to those fundamentalist standards and neither are most of you They include, inerrancy of the bible, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the literal resurrection of Christ and the second coming. This is a movement that clearly draws lines of inclusion and mostly exclusion and of course those outside are, you guessed it, going to hell. I will have a lot of company down there if they are right, but I don't think they are and I think Paul would agree with me.

Paul is arguing that the law has been fulfilled by Christ and now all the laws must be judged by a new standard, that of love of God and of neighbor. I mentioned that this letter speaks to us. How much of the division in Christianity today is because there are "rules" that must be followed. Everything changes when we judge all that stuff in Leviticus and Deuteronomy through the lens of love of God and love of neighbor.

There are two lists that Paul gives us that at first glance seem like simple lists of vices and virtues. However this does come off as rather legalistic. Don't do these things they are sinful and you will not enter the kingdom. Do these things and they will get you into heaven. That is how I believe many people understand and most churches would preach this passage. I want to offer something different.

I want to again call to your attention to our definition of sin and how we might look at these lists from a different point of view. Remember the Episcopal definition of sin is anything that breaks relationship between you and one of three things, God, other people and creation. A legalistic view of sin is what most of us grew up with especially if you grew up Roman Catholic. I remember my friends heading to confession and wondering what they would tell the priest. You had to come up with something and they were all very aware that some “sins” had a light punishment and others were punished more severely. In fact the church has the doctrine of mortal and venial sins.

Sin is more about the effect of our thoughts and actions. Anger can be a good thing. As you all could tell last week I was angry about the Orlando shootings and the effect they have on an entire population not to mention our whole country. However, how I respond to that anger can either be positive or negative. It can strengthen relationships or destroy them. This is why I said the response to hate is love and compassion.

The other problem with this passage is the list is one that is shall we say a little dated. Many of the terms meant something different to the recipients of this letter. So I turn as I often do to Peterson’s translation in the Message:

Gal. 5:19 It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; 20 trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; 21 the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on. This isn’t the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God’s kingdom.”

This translation picks up what I am suggesting about effect of sin, rather than some list of thou shalt nots. This is a list of what sin results in. Then Peterson comes back with the list of things that we should embrace:

Gal. 5:22 But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, 23 not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Paul then concludes by challenging us to live a life of the Spirit. He says that we carry these ideals not just in our hearts but that we live this way in all aspects of our life.

This is once again a call from Paul to live a gospel life, not just believe in a set of doctrines or laws. Paul speaks eloquently about what the fruits of a life lived this way will be. This will determine who enters the kingdom. The most important part to remember in this entire dynamic is that we decide whether to enter the kingdom. We can decide to stay outside the kingdom and that is my definition of hell, separation from God and people do choose that. There is however always the hope that anyone can turn around and adopt a life that blossoms with the gifts of the Spirit. That is how I choose to live my life, how about you?