

THE FORGOTTEN DOCTRINE (30TH June 2019)

GALATIANS 5:1, 13-25

In receiving lots of gifts, say, at Christmas or a birthday or an anniversary, have you ever forgotten to open one of them? Perhaps it was mixed up with all the gift wrapping or you were distracted by talking about the one you had just opened. In cleaning up you discovered this unopened gift or even more embarrassingly, the giver asked you how you liked the gift that you hadn't opened.

When we think of Jesus' death we usually think about salvation or the forgiveness of sins or maybe "heaven". In our reading today Paul reminds us of perhaps the most beneficial gift of all. It is the gift that can govern all our relationships and helps us to live more peaceably with our neighbours. Perhaps it's the gift we are most afraid of. It certainly is the gift we can easily mis-use or abuse, or even use to hurt someone. It is in fact one of the very first gifts God gives humankind. Yes, this gift goes way back to the Garden of Eden.

St. Paul writes, *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.* The Letter to the Galatians is different from Paul's other writings because this one is written to the churches in the region of Galatia rather than to a specific congregation such as the one in Corinth or Philippi. It is like a letter written to the Churches in Ku-Ring-Gai or the Churches in the Central West. He is dealing, quite sternly in fact, with the same problem that just keeps cropping up. Namely, the insistence of the Jewish converts to Christianity that Gentile converts need to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law. Of course the Gentile converts see no reason why they should do so. Even though Paul and Peter and the leaders in Jerusalem have already dealt with the matter, it is still raising its ugly head and causing division. A bit like those conservatives in our own Church still raising objections to same sex marriage even though the Church has dealt with the matter.

Jesus kept dealing with matters of Law during his Ministry. He kept on trying to show the difference between Law and Grace. The purpose of the Law was to bring people to God not to be used as an instrument which keeps people away.

Paul does not want this infant church to fall into the same misunderstandings as did the Pharisees and Leaders of the Church of Jesus' day. In this circular letter Paul is extolling the virtues and the values of a right understanding of freedom.

He put it in terms of freedom vs law or rules. He says that Jesus came to say that the entire Law is summed up in one command: *Love your neighbour as yourself.* If you do that one thing you have obeyed the whole Law. Instead of keeping an impossibly long list of rules (the 10 Commandments had been expanded to 614 by Jesus' time) you just need this single principle.

He compares it to a concept we don't use today but was very big in Greek philosophy – that of "the flesh". It meant the carnal, un-spiritual side of our behaviour. He argues from a biopic understanding of the human psyche in that there are two "sides" fighting for control over our actions: the flesh and the spirit. He urges these Christians to walk by the spirit.

Page 2

Don't spend your lives trying to keep endless rules but live in a way that shows the Spirit is within you. The Christian life is not about keeping rules or even worrying about Spiritual Gifts. What is important for us all is to show we belong to God by exercising the fruits or the results of the Spirit. He lists them: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The Law, whether civil or religious cannot legislate against these.

The difference is between a ladder and a field. Under the regime of the Law there was a rule for every behaviour. As you obeyed you climbed the steps. In a sense this made life easy because you knew right from wrong so you knew if you had obeyed or not. The problem with this is that you need to know all the rules and you needed someone to interpret or judge whether or not you had obeyed. This was the role of the Pharisees in Jesus day. It is the role of the Religious Police in some Middle Eastern countries and the role of the Head Pastor/Minister in fundamentalist churches today. They tell you what's right and wrong, they justify it with their interpretation of the Bible and so control you – at least on the spiritual level. The problem is that this is not what Jesus intended, it was not what the Apostles taught and it is not what the Bible teaches.

Rather than a ladder life is more like a field which has a fence around the perimeter. Stay within the fence and you are free to do whatever you want. The fence is the one great commandment mentioned earlier: *Love your neighbour as yourself*. Most other things are simply preference. Some worship using a prayer-book where everything is set out; others are much more free and pray in tongues, we are somewhere in the middle. I have worshipped in many different forms. I know what I like. I have my preferences. It is not a matter of "right and wrong" but rather what suits a particular community of believers. The method of having communion and so many other things fall into this category. The same is true for civil matters as well. Christians were both for and against same sex marriage. Non-Christians were both for and against it as well. Christian and non-Christians have different views over every other thing as well: Israel/Gaza, those for and against Trump, those for and against fossil fuels vs renewables and so on. We should all play in the field, loving our neighbours as ourselves and exhibiting the gifts of the Spirit.

It sounds all too easy, even glib doesn't it? If it's so easy why don't we do it? Even if it is glib, why don't we give it a go to see what might happen?

Freedom is hard. Parents often worry about how much freedom to give their teenage children. They might do the wrong thing, make a bad choice. Yes they might, in fact they will, but that is part of growing up; that is part of allowing them to grow up and being there for them if they do make a mistake. It's hard to give up control. It's hard to trust. It's hard to let go. In the Garden of Eden God told Adam and Eve they could eat whatever they like but there was only one tree that was forbidden to them. God trusted them to do the right thing. God allowed them the freedom to choose even though that meant choosing to believe the Devil rather than God. They had to suffer the consequences of their choice and they learned that not everyone can be trusted. Not everyone has their best interests at heart.

Freedom is hard because given choices we may choose poorly. Ultimately though that's the measure of real love. To allow people to choose. To trust they will choose wisely. To help pick up the pieces and teach them the better way when they don't.

Page 3

I SUPPOSE God could have created Adam and Eve in such a way that they always obeyed, always did the right thing, but in creating what is essentially a robot where is the love in that? True love must be given and received freely. Jesus' death gives us the choice to believe or not to believe; to follow a set of rules or to live freely; to seek to love one another with the Fruits of the Spirit or transfer to a 21st century Pharisee.

These are the choices we have. These are the choices God allows us to make because God loves us so much that in Jesus of Nazareth we see what it is like to live out the image of God within us.

Freedom is the forgotten doctrine but perhaps the most significant. "For freedom Christ has set us free".

AMEN
