

February 19, 2017
Lesson 12: Gal. 5: 1-17
Freedom in Christ

Context:

In today's lesson, we look at Paul's fifth chapter in Galatians where Paul does not mince words about things happening in the churches in Galatia. Throughout the chapter Paul makes several statements that remind the people that Jesus is the one they follow and his grace is sufficient. Everything else should fall under that grace and understanding that Jesus' words and commands are the ones we are to follow.

In the first section of the letter, Paul makes it clear that Christ is the one who has set people free. Being united in him was the most important thing, whether you were a former Jewish Christian or a pagan Gentile. Those things faded away as you joined the body of Christ that was united in following Jesus. Within the churches there was a lot of contention about what you had to do in order to be a part of the body of Christ. There were some teachers and individuals in the church who were advocating that people had to be circumcised and follow the law in order to belong to the church. Claiming his authority, Paul reminds them that his teaching was to help them realize that their freedom came in Christ. These other teachers were not helping and are creating more division in the body. They created so much division that Paul wishes that those stirring up the drama would castrate themselves! (That's one way to handle irate people, one that would not go over well today for good reason.)

Paul goes on to remind them that the real law they are to follow is a paraphrase on Jesus' last commandment: "To love your neighbor as yourself." When Jesus came to this earth, he fulfilled the law and gave an example for people to follow. Paul continues to warn that if people want to continue to attack each other, they better watch that they don't get destroyed. Attacking one another never leads to anything good. Instead, people are to be led by the Spirit and see that their desires need to include the well-being of other people. Selfishness is not a virtue and it is something that is not in the line with the Spirit. Essentially, Paul wanted them to think about how their behavior affected others.

Application:

Paul's words are ever true today as they were two thousand years ago. We all need to be reminded that we are free in Christ and that we are not the ultimate judges of who is and who is out of the body of Christ. Instead we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are to serve one another with humility and kindness. Tall orders, but really simple when you think about how we are to live day to day. There are several things that should stick out to us as we think about how we are called to live as Christians.

Firstly, Paul talks about the law and circumcision as not being the main tenets to belonging to the body of Christ. Basically, jumping through certain hoops to belong to the church. How many times do we have imaginary hoops or check lists that we think that people have to jump through in order to come to church or belong to Jesus? Sometimes I find myself thinking that a Christian looks this way or that way, and before you know it that person looks an awful lot like me. If we are honest

with ourselves, we will realize that sometimes we want people to be/think/look like we do without understanding that maybe God might be doing something with them that does not fit our boxes or plans. I will never forget going to General Conference with my college in 2008 and watching people of different nationalities and colors coming together and expressing how God was at work in their lives. And they all used different mediums. Some sang songs with dancing very different from my standing and singing hymns in place with gusto. Some prayed extemporaneously while others read beautifully composed prayers. Some had perspectives of the Gospel that had never crossed my mind. But all were there to celebrate that God was at work in the world and that Jesus was their one Lord and Savior.

We are called to see that God is at work in another person, even if they are totally different from ourselves. So a challenge for you this upcoming week may be to meet with someone who is different from you and ask how they see the world and how God has changed/called them. You may even be surprised at how much you have in common!

Secondly, Paul talks about how freedom in Christ leads us to serve one another in love. That is the main law we are to follow so that we do not devour one another. Being selfish never gets us anywhere. In my own congregation, I have been amazed at how my different people see their mission to serve others. One of my heroes is a retired elementary counselor who never stops doing for others even in the storms of life she faces. She still visits children at the local school and reads to them. She sometimes cooks for the teachers and leaves them surprises in the faculty room. During Christmas, she helps me find a family so that we can help them and insists on spending some of her own money. She even writes to a young man in prison who was one of her students even though he has been out of her classroom for years. Just being with her you feel as if you are one of the most special people in the world and she genuinely cares about what happens to you. She sees her mission as to love people and not just those of her color or background. Her love and kindness is indiscriminate. She listens to the Spirit and sees where she is needed to encourage and remind others that they are important. She models selflessness.

The older I get, the more I realize that we need people like her in the world. We need people who give of themselves and don't always ask: "Well what about me?" Just as Christ gave of himself to save the world, we are to give of ourselves. And as we do so, we show the world a new way of being. We show that the greatest calling we have is to be a servant and to make this world a better place. May we be reminded that we are to serve each other with love.