

Bible Study on Galatians 6

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It is a joy to look with you on Galatians. Luther called the letter to Galatians his wife. In this last chapter we will get an idea why it was so important to him. As we are looking into the text, we start with chapter 5, verse 25 so we have the context.

Galatians 5:25-6:2 (NRSV)

25If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. 26Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. 1My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. My predecessor in the Episcopal Office has written a commentary on the letter on Galatians, he pointed out that there is a difference between leading by the Spirit and being guided by the Spirit. Being guided by the Spirit is much more concrete, it involves your daily life, your daily decisions. When you are guided by the Spirit you watch for guidance for concrete direction.

All of chapter 6 speaks on how this looks. It describes how disciples of Jesus Christ live in this attitude in order that they are guided by the Spirit.

Paul in the letter to Galatians takes one example and the example is the relationship between the followers of Christ, the relationship in Christian community, with fellow Christians. How does the reality in Christian community look like when we are guided by the Spirit? This is the context of the verse, verse 2, chapter 6, that we should “carry one another burdens.”

This is the New Testament word in the Daily Moravian text. They put it into another context, faithful living, living in justice, looking for goodness for all. Paul reminds us that those who are bound together because they are saved by God's grace, should look after one another, carry one another's burden. The reality in a Christian community in the context of “carry one another's burden” is the Christian community where we often are a burden for one another because of our transgressions.

The question of how we deal with that is a crucial question. There is a temptation to deal with it in a judgmental way. For someone to say, “I know what is right, you weren't faithful enough to deal with it that way.” There is a temptation that one person looks at oneself as being better than another.

Carrying one another's burden means we live together for restoration, not punishment or separation. Restoration is different than punishment or separation. Restoration does not mean you don't take seriously who we are and what we are doing. It means you journey together, engage with one another in Christian spirit of faithfulness and trust, reminding one another what we learn from God. The Holy

Spirit, the Spirit of gentleness, is meant to restore relationships.

From John Wesley in his notes:

“Sympathize with and assist each other in all your weaknesses, grievances and trials.”

This is the Christian learning how to live in an imperfect Christian community where transgression is a reality, where we sympathize with and assist one another in our weakness and in our trials.

“The law of Christ (an uncommon expression) is the law of love: this our Lord peculiarly recommends; this he makes the distinguishing mark of his disciples.”

Many say the law of Christ is the law of love. Wesley says this is the distinguishing mark of his disciples. Disciples are marked because they live with one another in the law of love. Loving one another is what they are really looking for and putting into daily relationship.

This example of relationship and community with one another is best found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*. I have a practice from time to time to read *Life Together*. I think this is an important tool for any Christian community.

Bonhoeffer:

“Therefore will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches us that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only be that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian Community dawns where the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting.”

I was struck by that especially reading in a different language. Bonhoeffer speaks of a difficult occasion in Christian community that finds a new morning. This is the morning of the new things that is happening because the community of the followers of Christ is not composed by what we can do but the word of Jesus coming into reality. This happens as we deal with all the imperfectness and transgressions where we become a burden for one another in many reasons. We have to carry one another burden in spirit of love and gentleness.

This is connected to the Seed and Harvest image in Galatians 6:7-10 (NRSV)

7“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. 8If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. 10So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

This is the image of the wellness of the seed. Sometimes we think of putting the right seed in the right ground and then harvest will come. Here the question is on what ground we sow not so much whether we are sowing good crop.

Paul makes distinction between sowing to our own flesh in the sensing of how to

trust one's own means in terms of circumcision. The harvest, if someone is sowing to their own flesh, is corruption (Greek word *phthora* – destruction, decay, corruption)

Corruption is a certain way of evil, but corruption is a good word. Paul says that those who sow on their own ground, on their own possibility, on what they can contribute, are limited. By taking the laws seriously and demanding circumcision they sow to their own meaning and interest.

We see the sin of corruption in so many different fields. Corruption is a reality in our own lives. It includes our desire to be viewed by others in this way or that way.

The opposite Paul is emphasizing for us to live in this direction is sowing to the spirit which means to trust on what God is doing through the spirit of love. In this case, the harvest is eternal life. Not devastation, not relationship destroyed but eternal life in relation to God and one another.

How can we learn to sow to the spirit and to trust on what God is doing instead of working in our own system and thinking?

The next verses are very familiar: 10So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

John Wesley, in this notes, says: “At whatever time or place, and in whatever manner we can, in every possible kind, and in every possible degree, neighbors or strangers, good or evil, friends or enemies but especially to them who are of the household of faith, for all believers are but one family.”

Galatians 6:11; 15-17 (NRSV)

11 See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

15For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! 16As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. 17From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

Very nice words and blessings at the end but first a passionate way of pointing out what is really important to him.

These passionate words at end of passionate letter are written in own hand. Most things were not written by their own hand, they had scribes. The last few sentences are handwritten and we know the value of a hand written letter. Paul reminds the Galatians that although he is sticking with the context, he is doing it with a heart of love. He wants them to know the priority of love.

Paul's main emphasis is this question: what do you trust? What is really saving you? Is it the law or being saved by grace through Jesus Christ? He reminds the people of Galatians that people will fall apart if we focus on the wrong thing. Circumcision was wrong attempt. It was a human deed and it belongs to a system of customs. It was not what put Christ in the center. It is not what put the growing church moving forward. Are we tempted to trust human attempts more than Christ?

He was also looking at missional reality. He wanted the church to grow and flourish. He did not want people to have to follow the Jewish tradition in order to

experience the Christian tradition. Circumcision is not the new thing that is really pointing people into the future. Paul is saying that circumcision is something a human is doing and not what the spirit of God is doing. He urges people not to urge others to be circumcised. He even says that those who urge others, do it for their own means and purpose, although they know they cannot keep all the laws.

Paul says neither circumcision nor un-circumcision is anything, new creation is everything. Faith through love is everything.

Here the new creation is everything while in 5:8 faith through love is everything. Paul is working on justification, sanctification and transformation as God's work through Christ. God is offering this to us through Christ.

Even more: trusting upon Christ who was crucified and resurrected is everything. Paul is saying, "I am not proud of the things I have done, the only thing I am pointing to is that I am safe in Christ who is crucified and resurrected and I with him."

We live in this Lenten season and starting tomorrow we go into this week where we remember what it means to be crucified with Christ. I carry the mark of Christ branded in my body. He says he is stigmatized through Christ.

Are we, brothers and sisters, "stigmatized" because we are followers of Christ, crucified with him and revived with him? Do others see the marks of Christ in us?

Blessing at the end of our text (verse 18)

"May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters, Amen."

Martin Luther ends his commentary:

"This is the Apostle's farewell. He ends his Epistle as he began it by wishing the Galatians the grace of God. We can hear him say: "I have presented Christ to you, I have pleaded with you, I have reprovved you, I have overlooked nothing that I thought might be of benefit to you. All I can do now is to pray that our Lord Jesus Christ would bless my Epistle and grant you the guidance of the Holy Ghost. The Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, who gave me the strength and the grace to explain this Epistle and granted you the grace to hear it, preserve and strengthen us in faith unto the day of our redemption. To Him, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, be glory, world without end. Amen"

Thank you for listening, I hope we are guided by the word of God not only today but in the next week.