

Galatians 5: 16
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The last time we met, we discussed what Paul referred to as slavery to the law and the freedom of faith. Whenever we come to believe that the righteousness God demands, a righteousness that reconciles us to God which comes from the law and gives us the assurance of salvation, we are assuming responsibility for our own salvation by taking on the burden of the law. The law demands conformity just as a master demands that his slave does as he wills. Therefore, when we come to believe that works of any kind are required for reconciliation to God, and for the assurance of salvations, we become slaves. We turn ourselves into people who feel forced and pressured to perform certain works. Our conscience becomes captive to the law with respect to salvation, and this is the very definition of slavery.

However, it's essential to understand that laws of any kind do not have the power to change the desires of our hearts. The only thing the law can do is restrain us from doing the very things our hearts are motivated to do. The human condition is seriously distorted by sin—the condition of being curved in on ourselves such that our primary concern is self-indulgence and consumption—anything that satisfies an immediate self-directed need. A conscience taken captive by rules and regulations of any kind cannot change this distortion in the self, or what is often referred to as the “heart.” A person can forcibly comply with these rules. But the rules change nothing with respect to the problem of sin. For this reason, works of any kind do not reconcile us to God. They do not save us because they are unable to remove the sin that is in us—the sin that characterizes the human condition and gives rise to evil, chaos, and all manner of disorder.

Faith, on the other hand, receives the Spirit of Jesus Christ. He is God's gift of divine love, and divine love can and does save the power to change us, to root out the sinful desires that enslave us, and enable us to be free of the law. People who have received the power of divine love have turned away from their sinful desires. They have come to recognize the scourge of sin and therefore have turned to Jesus Christ for mercy, forgiveness, and the love that has the power to change and transform the self that is captivated by sin. Having received love, they are now equipped to love in return. Love is not self-directed as sin is. Love is other-directed. Love is capable of empathizing with the needs of others, and therefore it desires to address those needs. It's a simple matter of who a person is going to serve--the self bent in on itself, or others through the love received from God. This is freedom because now the person of faith freely chooses to serve. He is not a slave to his own needs. He is free to serve the needs of others. This is what Paul means by the freedom of a Christian.

In verses 16-26, Paul uses a common technique of the times. Moralists would write lists of virtues and vices so that their readers would understand what it meant to live a virtuous life. However, for Paul, this list has nothing to do with moral imperatives. This is a list that makes a distinction between the works of the sinful self, and the works of the self who is under the influence of the Spirit of Christ. These works he calls “fruits” because they are created by the self who performs or has them. The sinful self is referred to as “works of the flesh.” Flesh

here means the self that is alienated from God. With no influence from the divine Spirit, it does those things that reflect its distorted condition.

Before enumerating these “works of the flesh,” Paul refers to the struggle involved in the birth of the new self: the self which is born under the influence of the divine Spirit. Because the Spirit works against the old sinful self, there is a struggle involved in this new birth—a struggle that persists throughout one’s life. As Luther has pointed out many times, we are never completely free of this old self. Its desires can arise again and again. However, by turning to Jesus Christ in God’s word, and through much prayer, the power of Christ in us can overcome the desires of the old self and give birth to a new one over time.

Jesus referred to this in a very clear way when he told his disciples that if anyone wants to be his follower, he must pick up his cross. For if we lose our lives for his sake, we find them. Paul is referring to the same thing when he speaks of the struggle between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit.

In verse 19, he lists what he calls the “works of the flesh.” All of them are related to self-centered desires. For example, “licentiousness” is a desire to use another person for one’s own gratification. “Jealousy” is all about the desire for what others have. At the end of this list, Paul says that people who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Indeed, by definition, they desire to remain outside the influence and rule of God’s love. They prefer to act independently like Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God in order to “become like God.”

In verse 22, Paul contrasts the fruits of the Spirit: those things created in our hearts under the influence of God’s love in Christ. For example, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and self-control.” These are characteristics of a person who is acting under the influence of divine love. The love of Christ does not overlook sin. It breaks the power of sin. It takes it away so that people of faith became “a new creation.” (Paul’s words for a new self.) Jesus referred to it as being born from above.

In this section of the letter, Paul describes what is at stake in this controversy between law and faith in Christ. If the Galatians decide to remain enslaved to the law, they will also remain enslaved to sin. On the other hand, if they repent of what the Judaizers told them and put their faith in Jesus Christ instead, then they will receive the Spirit of Christ and thereby become new people: the people of God, the children of God, the body of Christ. This is all made possible because through faith, “Christ is formed in them.”