

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Dear Christians Living in Freedom:

Someone once said you can crush an iceberg and it's still ice. It's not until the sun melts the ice that it will turn into sweet, drinkable water. A bitter heart filled with hatred is like that. Only the love of Jesus, God the Son, can melt a bitter, spiteful heart and transform cold, hard hatred into pliable love.

God issues a mega-warning through Paul today. It's like a high voltage sign on a utility pole, or a no diving sign at the shallow end of the pool where you can break your neck. Ignore the warning at your own peril! God says bluntly: ***"If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."*** I don't know why, but we stubborn humans ignore this warning all the time. We must think we know better than God, but we absolutely don't! We all know that there are couples, families, communities, and even whole societies that have ignored this warning from God -- not to ***"bite and devour each other"*** -- and then have been ***"destroyed by each other."*** Beautiful relationships are turned to burned toast.

Jesus wants us to avoid that regrettable fate. God through Paul encourages us in his Word to ***Stand Firm in Christ's Freedom***. (1) ***He frees us from our sin's destruction***, and (2) ***He frees us to resist selfishness and walk with the Spirit (so we don't destroy ourselves)***.

1

Paul is writing to brand new Christians in Galatia (southern Turkey) who lived in a ruthless, violent world. He reminds them that Christ's perfect life and death and resurrection meant they would one day escape this troubled world and receive the gift of a happy and peaceful life in heaven when this life ended. Because of Jesus, their futures were bright, no matter what troubles or persecutions they faced at the present time. Christ's victory was their victory. On Judgment Day they would have nothing to fear. Jesus' blood had cleansed them from sin and made them God's precious people.

Five centuries ago the people of Florence, Italy found, in a heap of rubble, a block of marble. They saw a stone; but a fellow citizen named Michelangelo saw in his mind a statue and carved it out: his monumental statue of Moses! Out of an angry, persecuting Saul God carved out the Apostle Paul. Out of a despairing monk the Lord shaped a reformer named Luther. Fellow Christians, God saw us in our sin, pitied us, cleansed us by his Son, freed us from sin, and formed us into his holy temple!

Yet Paul has to warn the Galatians and us about sin. That's because the sinful flesh was ingrained in them and it still is in us. Paul says, ***"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."*** Being free from sin doesn't mean we are free to live any way we want to. Paul says God gives us guidelines: ***"Serve one another in love."*** He continues: ***"The entire law is summed up in a single command, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"i>*** If you are fighting with your spouse or your siblings or coworkers, you are not free. You are a slave to Satan who using you as his puppet. That is far from, ***"loving your neighbor as yourself."***

2

For sinners like us, loving others takes a lot of discipline and self-control. Love is hard work! Getting angry, being impatient, or hating others is easy...easy, yes, but destructive!

God says, ***"I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."*** Later he says, ***"Let us keep in step with the Spirit."*** He's saying, ***"Let God's Word be your guide. Grumbling against others, cutting people down, tattling about others' faults -- those sinful actions are not advocated in God's Word. That's not where the Spirit walks!"***

Paul then lays out for the Galatians and us a clear delineation between what our sinful flesh desires and what the Spirit produces. For the Christian, there should be no difficulty distinguishing that difference. He says, ***"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality*** (all sexual activity

outside of marriage), *impurity and debauchery* (wild, unrestrained living); *idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” The picture is one of gross, unchecked discord, contention, and immorality. God is saying, “*Quit the fighting, quit the hatred, quit the gossip, quit the backbiting and revenge; or, in modern language: quit yelling at people on the phone, quit posting nasty things on FaceBook, quit tweeting and texting disparaging messages, and quit living like pagans.*” But here’s the key. He’s not saying it to the other person over there. He’s saying it to **you** -- and he’s saying it to **me**, right here! We can skip the finger pointing. “*Well, I hope so & so is listening to this!*” No, **we** are “so & so.”

We can also skip comparing ourselves to others with the belief that I am better. “*Well, I might get angry. But that person gets angry more -- or first.*” Comparing myself to other sinners is like comparing this **poisoned river** with that poisoned river. Neither is better. Both need to be cleaned up. And Paul is telling us today: “*You worry about cleaning up this river, right here, not that river over there.*”

Paul also gives us a picture of a clean, pure river that we can strive for in our own lives: “***But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.***” To me, that’s an overwhelming list! That doesn’t describe me or any of us! Professor Koehler writes calmly, “***Faith must be practiced.***” We won’t produce perfect spiritual fruit until we get to heaven, but while we are here, we will practice, practice, practice! Living our faith takes conscious effort and training. Watch pro golfers and you wonder how many hours of practice it takes to create such muscle memory. Christian living takes that too: spiritual muscle memory. The more we practice being patient, kind, gentle, etc., the more we will be ready the next time an ugly situation arises -- when the heat is on. That’s why Paul writes, “***I say, live*** (literally: keep on living) ***by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.***” In other words, “Practice, practice.”

Our motivation? It’s our way to thank Jesus. Do you remember all those fruits of the Spirit? That’s how Jesus treats us: he is kind and good and patient and gentle. And when we fail at those things on the list, our ever-loving Jesus is still there to forgive us, to pick us up after falling flat on our faces, dust us off, and give us power to try again tomorrow. That’s our Jesus. His love, his caring, his forgiveness for sinners like us are amazing.

So, did you hear the warning siren in God’s Word today? I certainly did: “***If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.***” And he said, “***I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.***” Jesus doesn’t want us to be destroyed -- whether it’s our personal relationships with each other, or whether it’s our relationship with the Lord which would separate us from him for all eternity.

You are free, Christians. Stand firm in that freedom by trusting in Jesus and then gladly living for him who lived and died for you!

Amen.