

Galatians 5:1,13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

I'm sure that many of you have lived in different places. I moved from the Washington DC area to Colorado Springs in 1984. When I stop to think about it, I have to admit that it is weird for me to think that that was 32 years ago, next month. I mean, after all, on a good day I am only 25, especially during the first couple of days of VBS. On the last day I was 90.

Colorado Springs is a nice city. It is known for many things. It sits in the shadow of beautiful Pikes Peak. It is the home of NORAD, The North American Defense Command, dug deep into the middle of Cheyenne Mountain. It is considered one of the healthiest places in the country to live. The Olympic Training Center is there, as is the Air Force Academy, Ft. Carson, Peterson Air Force Base, and Schriever Air Force Base, the home of the Consolidated Space Operations Command.

Colorado Springs is also known for something else. It is one of the best places in the country to fly gliders. As the Rocky Mountains meet the plains, it is an awesome place for amazing thermals and updrafts that allow those who are into soaring the opportunity to achieve record-breaking heights in planes without engines. From what I have been told, it is a truly

amazing experience. It is something that is beyond words...quiet, peaceful, joyful and exhilarating...all at the same time.

It was cool to watch them climb. Do you know how they do it? Well, the way they gain altitude is to find one of those great thermals and then they circle around it and spiral higher and higher and higher. At certain times of the year it seemed like the sky was full of them, the pilots living a life that can only be understood by being experienced.

Which brings me to our passage today from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Paul is trying to show the people in Galatia a new understanding of the exhilarating freedom that exists beyond the law, a freedom and a life that can only be found in Christ.

If I can stretch the analogy a bit further, it is like soaring on a thermal. The goal of our existence is to soar higher and higher in order to draw closer and closer to God. And we do this by catching spiritual thermals; updrafts of the Spirit, that lift us towards God and life.

Pushing the analogy even further, Paul is telling us that these Spiritual thermals have names. He calls them love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As we build our lives around these fruits of the Spirit, as we live Spirit filled lives through Christ, as Paul would say, we spiral higher and higher and higher.

But there is even more to this, that Paul leaves between the lines. What we need to understand is that there is this symbiotic relationship going on between the process, a life of the Spirit, and the goal, drawing near to God. They play off of each other. As you embrace one, it, in turn, enhances the other. As you draw near to God, your life in the Spirit expands. And as your life in the Spirit increases, your distance from God shrinks.

Paul says it kind of like this. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; the elements of a life in the Spirit; all work together to bring each of us closer to God. And as we draw closer to God, the fruits of the Spirit are enhanced even further so that our proximity to God narrows even more. It is a beautiful spiral!

Do you see it? Do you see how it works? They work together. They play off each other. One enhances the other which, in return, empowers the first, so on and so on, round and round, which together leads us to the *life* that God created us for. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control all bring us to God and God brings us to a new experience of those fruits of the Spirit. Which one comes first I will leave for the philosophers and theologian to debate. Together, however, they bring us to a transformed and enriched life with God and each other.

But there is another side and Paul, not one to leave things unsaid, also recognizes that other side of the equation. If there is a warm spiral upwards, there is certainly a cold whirlpool downward. We call it the condition of sin (which is the separation from God) and the actions of sins (which are the works of a people separated from God), all of which serve to separate us

further from God and each other. It is the exact opposite from the life of the Spirit. Paul calls it the life of the flesh and goes like this:

As we fall further and further from God, our lives become filled with, and ruled by, things like fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing. It is hard to say with one breath. Just as engaging the thermal takes us higher, riding the whirlpool of those things that Paul described take us downward, further and further from God. And, as we descend further and further from God, as our condition of sin deepens, those things that take us from God gain more and more strength and power over our lives. Fornication and adultery become normal. We even make sitcoms and reality TV show about them. Impurity becomes relative. If it is true for someone somewhere, then who are we to say anything. Idolatry becomes just another choice in a complex world. Jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy take over our lives and we lose the vision for the life God made all people for, as we descend into a medicated existence of drunkenness, carousing, and other unhealthy distractions. Certainly we all see it around us.

In order to fully understand the condition of sin, we must understand how it too exists in a symbiotic relationship. As our closeness to God deteriorates, the things of the flesh gain power over our lives, which in turn furthers our distance from God. Round and round, it is a nasty whirlpool sucking us down the drain.

It is critical that we understand it. The condition of sin draws us into a life that diminishes us. And those things that diminish us in that life further separate us from God. It is a vicious circle, a killing whirlpool that leads to death. Do you see why Paul is so concerned!?

On the other hand, a closer relationship with God, through the Spirit, opens up to us life. It opens up to us life filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, which results in a closer experience of God for all of us. It is a wonderful spiral upward to the exhilaration of a Godly life together.

John Adams, in 1798, shortly after he had helped form our constitution, said, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Wise words for sure, but I don't think we have to restrict them solely to government. Wouldn't it also be true that every economic system is wholly inadequate to provide fair and just commerce for any other than a moral and religious people? How about education? What does it look like outside of morality and God? What does family look like detached from God? How about health care, politics, entertainment and sports, you name it . . . Is there any human conceived structure or enterprise that is not wholly inadequate except for, and by, a moral and Godly people?

Noah Webster, another framer of the constitution, went even further, saying: "The moral principles and precepts contained in the scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws. . . All the miseries and evils which men suffer, from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible."

Paul painted two paths for the church in Galatia and really for all human interaction. One path leads to God, filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The other, well, doesn't! We are either soaring on Spiritual currents or drowning in a whirlpool of a fleshly existence.

God invites us to soar!

Amen.