

Faithfulness Means Growth & Change 2022
Galatians 5:1, 13-16, 22-26 2 Peter 1:2-9

Galatians 5:1, 13-16, 22-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. 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. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

2 Peter 1:2-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.

When Kathy and I got married,
both of us already had our own homes full of stuff,
most of which went into storage while I was finishing seminary.

Then after graduation, when we moved to the first church I served,
all of those boxes full of our stuff came back out of storage.
As we began setting up our new home, especially the kitchen,
trying to merge our stuff meant a lot of change & compromise.

As we unpacked the boxes from the stuff I'd had in my kitchen,
my mismatched silverware and the odd dishes that I'd accumulated,
the familiar pots & pans I'd been using, well, they disappeared,
and were replaced with kitchen utensils that Kathy preferred.

That's because I love Kathy and want her to be happy,
so I learned to accept that **process of change** in our kitchen-
- that some things of my old life, life before Kathy they had to go,
and replaced by some better things became a part of **our kitchen**.

And as the years have progressed that process of change has continued
as more of my old stuff has made its way to youth-group yard-sales,
and Kathy has continued to buy and add more new kitchen utensils.

Similar to that process of kitchen-stuff transformation,
getting rid of some things and adding in other new things...

... in the life of a believer, so too, the Holy Spirit working within us,

is guiding a gradual process of change, our transformation,
which often means dropping some of our familiar worldly ways
as we learn and transition toward more faithful ways
of living that lead to more consistent discipleship.

It is the on-going work and presence of God's Holy Spirit within us
that changes our perspective; redirecting our focus and actions,
which is also the message and focus of both our texts today.

Typical of the Apostle Paul's New Testament letters,
after he left the church he started in Galatia,
they strayed off-track from what he'd taught them,
so Paul was writing to correct their misunderstandings, vs. 1

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

^{1st phrase} **For freedom Christ has set us free**
Grace through Jesus Christ liberates us to live in relationship
with the Lord as guided and sustained through the Holy Spirit.

Freedom is not independence or license to do anything that I want,
but it is a loving relationship with God, through which,
God's Holy Spirit leads us to act lovingly toward others.

Paul is saying Don't be enslaved again to anyone or anything,
other than to God who created us, blesses us, heals us and loves us.

^{2nd phrase} **Stand firm**
Because of God's character, grace, blessings and promises
we know we can trust as we're being strengthened to persevere,
just as Jesus said in the Upper Room, John 14:27 & Deut. 31:6

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.

^{3rd phrase} **do not submit again to a yoke of slavery**
These recent converts had gotten off-track in 2 separate ways.
^{1st} – some were accepting the bondage of Jewish law and ritual
by adding religious tradition to God's free gift of grace,
which we talked about extensively last Sunday.

^{2nd} – there were also some returning to their former pagan ways,

convinced that the immoral pleasures of that culture
were more desirable than the ways of living God intends,
the meaningful life for which we were loved & created to live well.

Paul warns them that they have got it all wrong, vs. 16, 13 & 14.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh... 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."

Living by the Spirit is a life within God's gracious love and purpose.
under the guidance & enabling power & presence of the Holy Spirit,
which has everything to do with having our focus on relationships...
... for as those being led and transformed by the Holy Spirit
our relationships become **the more important consideration.**

So the question is not, what pleases me and do I want and desire,
but what is the most loving-choice, the more Christ-like way?

Not long after I became a pastor, I was asked to do a baptism.

A friend of the family came to see me and brought along a bottle
of water he had scooped up from the Jordan river in Israel.

He explained that he wanted me to use it for the baptism
because that would make it more holy and special
since that water is from where Jesus was baptized.

The problem was, that back in seminary one of my theology professors
had devoted almost an entire lecture to argue and explain,
why using Jordan River water for Christian baptism
was as she described it, **a theological travesty.**

The problem is not with the Jordan River water itself,
but that when we perceive it as something special,
or we assign some holy or spiritual significance to it,

that becomes a distraction away from the true meaning of baptism,
which is about God's grace and mystery beyond explanation,
that God chooses to set apart and use **ordinary things**
in extraordinary ways to accomplish God's purpose & will.

For example, common everyday bread and juice
are set apart to accomplish God's purpose in Communion.
Ordinary and less-than-perfect human beings are called
and equipped by the Lord to serve in extraordinary ways.

In baptism the plain old tap water we use is sign and symbol
of the amazing saving and gracious love and mercy of God.

In all of these, they point to the gift and saving grace of God,

by showing the ordinary being put to extraordinary use by the Lord.

That is an important, and even critical theological understanding
that is deliberately and carefully laid out in the Presby BOO.

So I tried to explain the theology behind our Presbyterian beliefs,
when much to his chagrin I refused and wouldn't go along with
his water from the Jordan River being used for the baptism.

Now according the PC(USA) Book of Order and Directory for Worship,
I was absolutely right to be rigid in my refusal ---
but as a servant of Jesus Christ and participant in grace,
I could not have been more wrong.

As a young, new pastor, my focus was on getting the ritual right,
rather recognizing an opportunity to reflect God's gracious love,
which really is the point and purpose for baptizing.

Looking back these many years later,
**I was being stubborn, and I was missing the point
which was to baptize as a sign of God's grace & mercy.**

The question is more than just what some church rule book says,
but, what is the more loving response in this circumstance?
How do I demonstrate God's grace in this situation?
And how can I best let God's gracious love
flow through me and the things I say and do?

Our Christian life together can be difficult and very complicated,
and goes way beyond just following religious rules and rituals,
or trying to impose our set of ideas or what we've decided & want.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came as God's gift of presence & power
to guide us in faithfully walking with him in grace, mercy & love,
which replaces rigid specifics of ritual and rules.
**The question is not so much knowing the right thing to say or do
as it is, discerning what is the most loving thing to say or do.**

From a religious perspective, just obeying the rules of religion
is fairly simple, because you can almost always be told what to do.
That's not nearly as difficult, confusing and complex
as balancing the rules with our call to love our neighbor
so to faithfully reflect God's goodness, mercy & grace.

We can be absolutely correct in our theology and church doctrine.
We can have all the facts straight and even truth on our side,
but if our being right means we crush other people like bugs...
... then we have missed the whole point of the gracious love of God...

... because the people involved will always matter way more
than the rules & traditions themselves, for led by the Spirit

the Church is really about God's grace & our relationships.

Now that doesn't mean that we never take a stand for what is right –
but it shifts our emphasis beyond insisting on rules & traditions,
to a deeper consideration and compassion for others,
because it's God's will that we do no harm to other people.

Knowing exactly when to take a stand, and when to relent for love
is difficult & complicated, and it's not an easy simple choice.
But my hope and comfort is this, that even when I don't get it right,
God's grace still prevails, for God's victory & purpose are assured.

Paul provides a picture of that to the church in Galatia,
clear and concrete ways that the flow of grace can be expressed,
as the result of the presence & power of God's Spirit, vs. 22-23, 25.

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. If we live by the Spirit,
let us also be guided by the Spirit.

**The point is,
fruit-behaviors will flow from the Spirit leading us from within.**

Peter's writing provides a very similar message,
perhaps a bit more blunt and direct, like Peter in the Gospels.

Peter's writing to offer hope and encouragement to that early church
that was struggling & suffering under extreme attack & persecution.

The assurance from Peter is that we already have all we need, vs. 3.

His divine power **has given us everything needed** for life and godliness, through the knowledge of
him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

That is a truly amazing and wonderful statement of hope and promise.

The Lord has already made available all that we need to live well,
right here and now where God has placed us to make a difference.

**And I need to remember and trust that truth, especially in times
or situations when I feel discouraged, disappointed or defeated.**

And Peter's affirmation and challenge continues, vs. 5-7

For this very reason, you must **make every effort to support** your faith with goodness, and
goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and
endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

Another meaning of the Grk word translated 'support' is 'enhance'.
So the growth process that Peter is describing can go like this:

We respond to God's healing & saving gift of gracious love by faith.

Our journey of faith
includes our commitment and effort to grow & enhance that faith.

We grow and **enhance** our faith with our active goodness or virtue.

We grow & **enhance** that virtue with knowledge of God & God's will.

We grow and **enhance** that knowledge with self-control,
trying to bridge the gap between our knowledge & our deeds.

Our self-control is **grown and enhanced**
through our endurance & tenacious perseverance.

Our endurance is **enhanced** by godliness or piety as led by the Spirit.

Our godliness is **enhanced** by mutual affection or brotherly kindness,
and that mutual affection is **enhanced and deepened** by agape love --
- the deepest sacrificial love that's without limits or conditions
and that places the needs of other about our own needs or wants.

Also notice that the flow or progression Peter describes
begins with faith and that journey leads to Christian love,
and faithfulness lead by the Spirit means growth and change.

Peter's teaching connects with the message of Psalm 51

*O Lord, you desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. O Lord, open my lips, and
my mouth will declare your praise.*