

The Gospel of Empowerment
A Sermon on Galatians 5:1, 13-25 by the Rev. Philip Major
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The Good News of Christ Jesus is a message of freedom and empowerment. This is God's intention for us: that we be empowered and that we be free. As I grow older, I notice there are many ways this message gets lost, or we get distracted from hearing God's intention for us to be free and for us to be empowered. For instance, in daily life and in scripture people sometimes use metaphors in ways that are helpful, and sometimes in ways that are unhelpful.

Paul uses a metaphor to explain that the church is like a physical body, with a variety of different parts that need each other in order to be effective. As the body of Christ, we need members from diverse backgrounds, with diverse abilities and perspectives. This is a metaphor of empowerment. Paul's metaphor empowers the diverse members of the church to use their gifts. We see that this metaphor is true and helpful, because churches that include people of diverse abilities, perspectives and backgrounds often function more effectively as the body of Christ.

Sometimes metaphors are not helpful. They distract us from the main idea or lead to absurd conclusions. Someone once made the argument that making people register their guns with the government is like the Nazis forcing the Jews to register with the government. This metaphor is a distraction from the real question. The argument leads to less freedom and takes away power, especially from children and other vulnerable people. We see this metaphor is absurd, because in real life the increasing, uncontrolled spread of guns has led to increasing amounts of fear, misery and death for people in America.

Today I am going to make the bold assertion, that, while our passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians contains several helpful ideas, it uses a metaphor that is a distraction and a stumbling block for Christians. In this passage, Paul uses a metaphor in a way that seems to be leading him away from his primary message. Paul's metaphor of the spirit and the flesh as being opponents, as if my body is at war with my spirit and must be defeated, has become a stumbling block for generations of Christians.

In order to understand the way Paul's metaphor leads us astray, let's remember the Jewish faith affirms that God is present and active in the created world in a powerful way. In the first chapter of Genesis God creates the physical world, including the plants, the animals, and the people. Then God looks at all of creation and says that it is very good.

As the Jewish faith developed it incorporated many physical practices. These included many practices that have significant health benefits, such as dietary rules, handwashing, and resting on the Sabbath day. In his letter to the Romans, Paul emphasizes that, although the Jewish faith incorporates a long list of physical practices, the foundation of the Jewish faith is the relationship of grace and faithfulness between God and God's people. Paul argued that the Jewish faith is at heart a spiritual relationship. Likewise, as he brought the Gospel of Christ to the Gentiles, Paul argued that following Jesus is a spiritual practice, not a set of physical practices.

About twenty years after the time of Christ, Paul spent a year or two in Galatia gathering these congregations of Gentiles. Then he moved on to the next place. After he left other preachers came and took over leadership of these congregations. This was the time when Paul received letters and wrote letters to the churches in Galatia. In the letter to the Galatians we read today, Paul is especially upset about something that has happened since he left the region.

In chapter one of the letter Paul expresses his dismay. *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.* The new preachers are telling the congregation that in order to follow Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, they must follow all of the physical practices of the Jewish faith. Paul takes the opposite

position. Paul argues that Gentile followers do not need to adopt all of the Jewish practices in order to follow Christ.

This was a continuing question and controversy for the first generations of Christians. In order to follow Jesus, is it necessary to adhere to the physical practices described in the Hebrew Scriptures? For many of the first Christians the answer was yes. Paul seems to be the primary person arguing that it's not necessary to adhere to the physical practices of Judaism in order to follow Jesus. So in Paul's letter to the Galatians we have front row seats to a debate, to an argument between Paul and this other group of preachers.

Paul has a nickname for his opponents. Paul refers to those who advocate for adherence to dietary, bathing, and circumcision rules as 'the circumcision faction'. Paul's words are harsh, which gives us a clue he is losing this argument with the circumcision faction.

We can also see Paul is losing the argument in the way he struggles to find a metaphor to convey his message. Paul presses the metaphor of the flesh and the spirit being opposing forces, as if they are doing battles against one another. Paul describes the flesh and the spirit as opposed to each other in a way that is contrary to Hebrew scriptures. Let's also notice that Jesus does not describe the spirit and our physical bodies as being at war with one another. Jesus took care of the physical needs of the people. He healed the sick. He fed people who were hungry.

There is part of Paul's message that is very helpful. Paul is right in describing discipleship as a spiritual journey. Paul beautifully describes the fruits of our spiritual journey. *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.* We see this truth in our lives.

But sometimes metaphors are a distraction. There are times when we struggle to use a metaphor and it leads us away from the main idea. Paul writes, *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.* It's been unhelpful for Christians to follow Paul's metaphor of the flesh and the spirit being in opposition to one another. Christians have sometimes acted as if our spirits, given to us by God, are at war with our bodies, also given to us by God. The results have been harmful to many people.

We have allowed the idea of a struggle between the flesh and the spirit to distract us from the empowering, liberating parts of Paul's letter to the Galatians. In last week's passage we read these verses, *For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.* This is a message of empowerment and freedom. Paul affirms and builds upon the ideas of inclusion and community, and the unity of God's family that are at the core of Jesus' ministry and teaching.

I have no doubt that generations of slave owners and generations of men intent on ensuring the submission of their wives would have done everything in their power to skip these verses and go right to the part about the flesh and the spirit being at war with one another. I'm sure they were similarly uncomfortable with today's verses about freedom.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. This is one of those sentences that is more powerful when it is not turned into a metaphor. *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." For the sake of freedom Christ has set us free. This is a message of empowerment. We are empowered to choose to love. We are empowered, so we are able to choose to serve.

Five hundred years ago Martin Luther summarized much of what Paul says. Martin Luther observed that a Christian is the most free person of all people, subject to none. He also observed that the Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.

In a few days, on the 4th of July, we will celebrate the day we call 'Independence Day'. No doubt there will be much talk of freedom and about the United States being a nation founded on a concern for freedom.

As we celebrate the birth of the United States let's remember the ideas about freedom and empowerment that are given to us as disciples of Jesus. Those of us who have accepted Jesus' invitation to become members of God's family have been empowered. It's the freedom of being regarded as equal to the other members of God's family. It's the freedom to set aside harsh judgments of ourselves and others because God is our only judge. It's the freedom to be able to give to others, and serve others, and forgive others, just as we have been served, just as we have been forgiven, just as God has given us many gifts.