

June 5, 2016

Another Gospel

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all." Galatians 1:6-7

"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:13-14

"So, I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature...the acts of the sinful nature are obvious...but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Galatians 5:16-23

As a believer I have been set free from a faith that demands that I earn my way to heaven by my own perfect keeping of a system of rules and regulations. Does that mean that there are no rules for believers? Of course not! But the one that really matters is the one that the Apostle says sums up all the others: ***"Love your neighbor as yourself."***

It always amazes me when I listen to a conversation about the authority of the Bible that I so seldom hear this commandment being held up as the one we must all follow. We all tend to turn instead to the commandments and would-be commandments that require so much less, don't we? Loving others is hard, but it is the central characteristic of every true believer. So, how do we become more loving toward others?

As he so often does in his letters, Paul will show the believers across Galatia that the life of a true believer is marked by one of two completely contradictory choices. On one hand you and I can continue to live to gratify the self; the flesh. We can pursue our own way, our own gratification, and our own self-interests at all costs. We have the freedom to choose that life course if we want to.

On the other hand we can choose to put to death our self-serving ways and surrender our lives to the direction of our loving and merciful Father. We are free to choose between these two, but we cannot choose both. There is no middle ground here. I am either pursuing my own way or I am surrendering my way to the Lord.

So, if I choose to pursue my own way what will my life look like? Paul would tell us that the actions of those who let this side of their nature lead the way are obvious: ***"...sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God."*** (Galatians 5:19-20, NLT)

In stark contrast to these characteristics of a life lived pursuing self-gratification are the products of a life led by God's Spirit. ***"...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control..."*** are not things we do, but a description of the way we live and act toward others.

How do we become the sort of person whose life is defined by these qualities?

Paul shows us again. ***"For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want."***



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These two powerful forces are at work within each and every one of us all the time. But, their power to direct our actions and attitudes is still controlled by our choices. Over and over again I either to choose to let my selfish nature dictate my behavior or I let the Spirit of God dictate my behavior. In the end I am either Spirit-led or I am not, because of my own choices. Ultimately, I am always absolutely responsible for the way I behave and for the way I treat others. No excuses.