

Topic: Holy Living

Text: Galatians 5:13-25



Introduction:

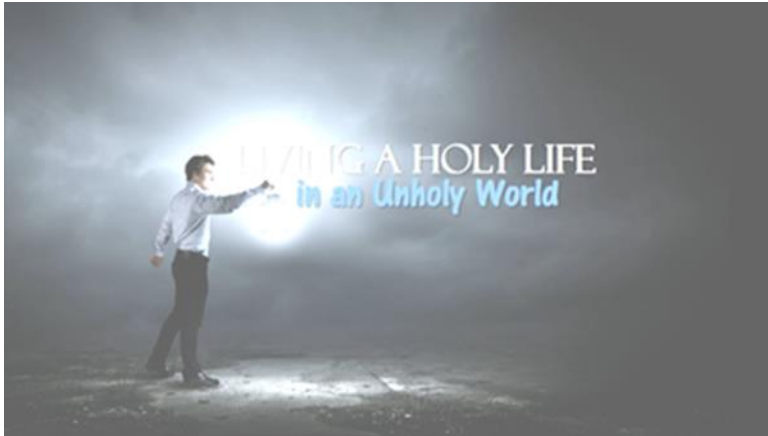
What does it mean to live a holy life? It can be tempting for some to see holiness as a matter of following lists of “do’s and don’ts;” that is, following a set of rules for what not to do and a set of rules for what to do. Passages of scripture like this one can be heard to support this view, as Paul gives exactly those kinds of lists. But to hear Paul as bringing a set of rules or laws misses his point about holy living. While it is true that he gives a listing of virtues and vices, and lying behind this list is Paul’s powerful encounter with God’s grace known through Christ. Even more, however, Paul views holy living as a life led by the Holy Spirit to form a Christian community of love and service.

In this epistle, Paul is quite agitated because the church in Galatia seems to have drifted from following Paul’s understanding of the gospel to other teachers that insisted on the observation of Jewish laws and rituals. Paul considers this to be a dire threat to the “truth of the gospel,” (as we see in Galatians 2.5) that requires immediate correction. Paul’s emphasis in this letter is that righteousness comes through faith in Christ and not through following the law. In this, the theme of the epistle is stated most clearly in 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” That is, in Christ we are free from the demands of the law.



Law in the Text: If we are free from the demands of the law, why do we see Paul condemning certain behaviors in the passage in chapter 5? It would seem that some of the people were using the message of freedom from the law as an opportunity for selfish behavior. These people continue to live by the flesh. We might recall from previous issues of *Pathways to Preaching* Paul's distinction between "flesh" and body:" the "body" (*soma*) is our physical body and is morally neutral, while "flesh" (*sarks*) indicates our bodies fallen into sin. Paul notes that the works of the flesh are obvious, with examples such as fornication, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, envy, drunkenness, quarrelling, and so forth. What is obvious about these behaviors is that they are self-centered. They are actions that place oneself over the needs of others. To use one's freedom in Christ for one's own gain is the mark of living in the flesh rather than by the Spirit.

When we fail to follow the law, there are consequences. Drunkenness, for instance, is unhealthy for our bodies. It also leads us to broken relationships with other people. The same is true with the other behaviors listed here. The consequences of falling into the sinful works of the flesh are injury to ourselves and others. In such actions, we go against God's vision of harmony within the world that God has made. They create a disruption to the goodness of God's creation. Thus through our self-centered actions we separate ourselves from God.



Gospel in the Text: Living in the Spirit, we are free from the law. When Spirit gives us life, we need not be told what to do. The Spirit moves us to seek the best for others. We are not bound by specific laws and rituals. In 5:6 Paul announces the theme that lies behind verses 13-25: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” The specifics of our actions are not what counts: rather it is the question of whether our will is motivated by faith to turn us towards others in care. Our freedom in Christ, then, is not one for returning to our old patterns of self-centered life, but rather is the freedom to leave those sinful patterns behind and to live our lives for the good of others. We are freed from the separation from God that we have created; God breaks through it and comes to us!

Transformation in the Text: As we have seen, then, when we receive the gospel of freedom it allows us to care for others. In this we see that Paul holds that there is only one fruit of the gospel, and that is love for others. This fruit is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, but it is in fact one fruit. These characteristics are all aspects of being “slaves to one another.” (5:13). They are about living for the needs of others rather than out of self-indulgence. Thus the transformation seen through the gospel is a turn from being focused inwardly on ourselves to outwardly on the needs of others. Transformation in the gospel is growth in love for others.

The constraints on our freedom are the responsibility and commitment to the welfare of others in the community. Yet in the Spirit these constraints are not truly constraints. What is transformed is our will. We are moved from a desire to satisfy our own concerns and wishes to commitment to addressing the concerns of others. This is not a limitation but a joy, and law cannot prescribe how to be joyful.

The love of neighbor as well as the self that Paul references in 5:14 opposes the works of the flesh, such as the items in Paul's partial list of works which harm and disrespect oneself and others in the community. Again, what matters is faith working through love. To love is to live by the Spirit. To live for the self is to live in the flesh. Holy living means being led by the Spirit to love others.



Theological Reflection:

What, then, can we find here about holy living? Life in the Spirit is a life of commitment to the community. It is a life of love. We can recognize the difference between a work of the flesh and a work of the Spirit through asking whether it is an act where a person is focused on attending to their own needs or an act of care for the needs of others.

At the same time, we must remember that the difference between selfish acts and selfless ones is a matter of motivation. Motivation cannot be seen. We can never be entirely sure of our own motivation, let alone the motivation that drives others. While it is certainly true that some acts are obviously self-indulgent, most actions are mixed. Some concern for

others is mixed into many selfish acts. More importantly, I would argue, is that even the most self-sacrificing human acts have some degree of selfishness mixed into them. We cannot be free from sin, but rather are entrapped by it.

Indeed, it is crucial that we remember that the fullness of life in the Spirit is at present incomplete. We are called to a life in the Spirit, but we are also not yet fully free from being entrapped in sin. Nonetheless, God has already rendered a verdict of “no condemnation” on our sins, as Paul argued in Romans 8:1. Thus even though sin is still a reality in our lives, we are not condemned for this reality. We are called to a new life, but we are not condemned for being under the sway of sin. Instead of condemning us, God has condemned sin itself. Thus we lived a mixed existence, knowing what we are called to be but not able to be that person.

Thus on the one hand, we gain an image of the Christian community as being one of intense love for one another. This love is marked by service towards each other, as mutual slaves to one another. Such a community is not possible within the world as it is now. The holiness of the church is an eschatological hope of the community of saints that will be, but cannot be a fully experienced reality now. Holy living is thus a life of yearning for the Spirit to move in us, free us from being self-centered, and turn us in love towards our neighbors. Holy living is known in our love for one another.

Quotes from Theologians:

“This fellowship [of the church] is twofold: on the one hand we partake of Christ and all saints; on the other hand we permit all Christians to be partakers of us, in whatever way they and we are able. Thus by means of this sacrament [of communion], all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all; and through the change wrought by love there is one bread, one drink, one body, one community.” – Martin Luther