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Cover Art

Paul with Phebe illustrated for the Wittenberg Bible
Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1534



Forever Shall Abide

The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

read faithfully with Martin Luther



A Lenten Devotional

Week Six: Galatians 5:7-5:26

Come, holy Light, guide divine,
Now cause the Word of life to shine.
Teach us to know our God aright
And call Him Father with delight.
From ev'ry error keep us free;
Let none but Christ our master be
That we in living faith abide,
In Him, our Lod, with all our might confide.

- Martin Luther
"Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord"

"The doctrine of faith is a sunbeam coming down from heaven to illumine, brighten, and direct us. Just as the word with all its wisdom and power cannot bend the rays of the sun which are aimed directly from heaven to earth, so nothing can be taken away from or added to the doctrine of faith without overthrowing it all."

· Martin Luther

You receive a phone call that you've just won a free cruise. Many people would hang up right then and there. Why? Isn't it good to receive something free? Sometimes we are suspicious of free stuff. We wonder, "What's the catch?" "What will I have to buy to offset the free goodies?" We're all a little too used to learning that "free" doesn't mean "free."

As Paul writes to the Galatians, he is concerned about those who are preaching a different gospel. An insidious doctrine was being preached by some that a person must be circumcised. A false teaching such as this could spread throughout the church, much like we've seen other false doctrines spread through the centuries.

The only means of salvation is still by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. The word grace means that we are made right with our Heavenly Father as a free gift. There's that word again: free. This is why grace is such a difficult concept for people in church bodies everywhere to accept. Does "free" really mean free? "Should I take God at His word that the gift is free?" we may ask.

Paul points out that if he was still preaching circumcision, no one would bother him. People gladly do the Law, because we want to control our own destiny, to affect salvation through our own works. This is a doctrine of despair. When we realize doing the Law is an entanglement of epic proportions and we utterly fail at it, we know we're doomed.

But the Gospel is free. It is the most beautiful free thing there ever was, because God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ has no strings attached, nothing we must do according to the Law to save ourselves. Christ has done it for us.

- Rev. Chris Truelsen

Our pray

Lord Heavenly Father, thank You for the richness of Your grace and salvation given in Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

"True believers are no hypocrites. They crucify the flesh with its evil desires and lusts ...by fasting and exercise and, above all, by a walk in the Spirit. To resist the flesh in this manner is to nail it to the Cross. Although the flesh is still alive it cannot very well act upon its desires because it is bound and nailed to the Cross."

· Martin Luther

These are interesting words as we wind our way through Lent. Lutherans sometimes struggle over what to do with the Lenten season. Observe it with certain spiritual disciplines, like many other Christians do? Maybe put a Lutheran spin on it? Or just abandon the practice altogether? Luther, of course, has no interest in debating any of those angles. What matters to him—indeed, what matters to St. Paul—is that we actively take on sin in our lives wherever it is found. Lent or no Lent, the Scriptures urge us to crucify our sinful flesh at every opportunity.

Christ forgives your sins because of what He has done for you. That is beyond question. But sin is still around. Just look in the mirror if you have any questions. Review yesterday in your mind and it should be clear. Sin is alive and kicking as long as we are in the flesh. Christians don't take sin lightly, however. We don't ignore it or pretend it doesn't exist or simply excuse it as a mistake. No, we acknowledge it for what it is: the very desires, actions, and attitudes that led to our eternal condemnation.

Yet these same desires, actions, and attitudes also led directly to the cross of Jesus Christ, where the sinless Son of God died a death He did not deserve for sins He did not commit, in order that we sinners might not suffer God's wrath, but have forgiveness. Jesus forgives those sins. Jesus forgives your sins. Jesus died for your sins. What greater motivation for taking on sin, for "crucifying the flesh," for "walking by the Spirit" could there possibly be than knowing what your Savior has done for you?

- Rev. Dr. Richard J. Serina, Jr.

Our pray

Lord Jesus Christ, by the Spirit lead me to put to death the deeds of the flesh and live in the light of Your death and resurrection. Amen.

"The law cannot accuse and condemn the just; nor can it disturb their consciences. It tries, of course; but when Christ has been grasped by faith, He dispels the Law with all its terrors and threats. Thus it is completely abrogated for them, first in the Spirit, but then also in works. It does not have the right to accuse them; for spontaneously they do what the Law requires, if not by means of perfectly holy works, then at least by means of the forgiveness of sins through faith."

· Martin Luther

99 times out of a hundred, when I speak about this passage, I talk about the "fruits" of the Spirit, and then I key in on whichever of that list of nine things I wish to focus upon. However, did you note that Paul doesn't say "fruits." He says "fruit," singular. There is one fruit; one fruit that is love and joy and peace and the whole list all at the same time, all together.

Of course they are all together, for they are the fruit that comes from the Holy Spirit giving us Christ Jesus and His forgiveness, life, and salvation. The Holy Spirit always points us, not to works, but to Christ. Wherever Christ takes root, from there will flow His fruit. He is the vine, we are the branches, and whoever abides in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit will bear fruit (John 15:5). All of these will come forth.

Christ and the Spirit are at work in you. Because you're still in your sinful flesh, you don't always see it. Indeed, until He comes again, we're going to live out the struggle against our sinful flesh that Paul has so often referred to. Yet, Christ is at work in you and through you, and He makes you to be fruitful. How? Not by focusing on works, not by yelling, "be fruitful," at you. No, you are made fruitful when the Spirit calls you by the Gospel and gives you Christ. Over and against all the foolish things your flesh craves, God has promised to bring forth fruit in you, for you belong not to your flesh, but to Christ – and where Christ is, there fruitfulness will be.

- Rev. Eric Brown

Our pray

Almighty Father, bless the Word which through Your grace we now have heard. Oh, may the precious Seed take root, spring up and bear abundant fruit. Amen.

"The more certain we are about the freedom granted to us by Christ, the more unresponsive and slothful we are in presenting the Word, praying, doing good works, enduring evil and the like."

· Martin Luther

"Ah, we have to take a test on Friday," cries the class. "No," responds the teacher, "you get to take a test on Friday." In some ways this little exchange reflects our attitude towards doing good works compared to God's.

In the above quote Luther is chastising himself and all who live in the freedom of the Gospel for skipping out on doing good works since they no longer merit God's favor. We do not have to do a single good work to keep in God's good graces. In fact all the good things we ever do would not merit a single blessing from Him. We are in His good graces solely based on the works of His Son. Our works have been removed and replaced by the work of Christ. Christ's works become our works.

We do not do good works because we have to, even if we think to ourselves, "I have to go to church. I have to be nice to that jerk. I have to feed my kids several times every single day." We do good works because we are joined to Christ. We have become like Him and so like Him we love our neighbor. We take care of our kids, are nice to our enemies, and go to our Father's house because that's exactly what Christ did and now does in us.

- Rev. Matthew Brackman

Our pray

Lord Jesus Christ, grant us the gift of Your Holy Spirit so we see the many great and wonderful works You have provided for us to do. Motivate us by the love You have shown to us to love our neighbor in these good works. Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

"No one can avoid desire, but it is possible for us to keep from obeying the desires."

· Martin Luther

"We are spirits in the material world," sang British band the Police in a hit several decades ago. "Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter," intoned Yoda to Luke Skywalker in the original Star Wars movies. Is that what Paul is suggesting in our reading today? Are we called to turn our back on the things our bodies want and live invisible lives instead?

Try rereading Galatians 5:16-17, substituting "God's nature" for "the Spirit" and "sinful nature" for "flesh." If you do, you will see Paul's real point. We have died to our sinful nature and now Christ lives in us (Gal 2:20). We have taken off our sinful nature and put on God's nature in our baptisms into Christ (Gal 3:27). Why do we want to go back to what is dead when we are now alive? Why would we put off our beautiful new clothes to put on old rags? Why would we do what the sinful nature desires, which leads to death, when we can do what God's nature in us wants?

The life of the Christian is not one of trying to become some "other-worldly spirit" in this created world. Rather, we are to become God's creatures in a world filled with those unwittingly serving Satan and being led to death. The Spirit alive in us is fighting against the desires of the dying sinful nature. God's Spirit speaking through the Word shows us what is good to do, and what temptations will only hurt others and hurt ourselves. It is a war inside. But not a war between some invisible realm and the physical world. It is a war between God's good and gracious will and sin itself. It is a war in which Christ won victory for us on the cross, and now calls us to live in that victory that is ours.

- Rev. Charles St-Onge

We pray

Lord of Light and Truth, keep us from obeying sin and help us love You and our neighbors rightly. Amen.

"This is a very harsh but most necessary sentence against false Christians and smug hypocrites, who boast about the Gospel, faith, and the Spirit but meanwhile go on smugly performing the works of the flesh.... Perhaps this severe sentence would frighten some of them thoroughly, so that they would begin to battle against the works of the flesh by the Spirit and stop performing them."

· Martin Luther

In the next verses, when Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, there are three sets of three. This evokes the Trinity. Each characteristic is distinct and clear. Practice of these fruit is a harmony, joining us to the song of heaven.

In these verses, however, Paul lists sixteen works of the flesh without any discernible order. They are a rat's nest. Some appear linked, maybe even repetitions of previous works. Finally, at the end of the list, Paul throws out, "and things like these." Luther comments on that line, "It is impossible to enumerate all the works of the flesh."

We cannot list them all, but they run together and end up a muddle. They are works *of the flesh* and are therefore passing, forgettable. They are the chaff (Ps 1).

The works of the flesh are not only forgettable in this life, they burn up in the last (1 Cor 3:12-15). How much of your life will remain when it passes through the fiery judgment?

The man who would cling to his chaff will also be destroyed. You are not such a man. You repent. You hunger for the fruit of the Spirit. Blessed are you, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for you will be filled (Mt 5:6).

Perhaps you have damaged a hard drive and feared you would lose everything. When, instead, a technician or friend can save some of your work, you are happy.

Jesus not only saves much more of the work we have done in the flesh than we would expect, He restores our flesh, that we might begin again in eternity. In Him is life, even our life!

- Rev. Daniel Guagenti

We pray

Lord Christ, thank You for crucifying our flesh and its banal passions. Thank You for raising us to life eternal in You. Amen.