

*You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?*<sup>8</sup> *That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.*<sup>9</sup> *“A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”*<sup>10</sup> *I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.*<sup>11</sup> *Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been abolished.*<sup>12</sup> *As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*<sup>13</sup> *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*<sup>14</sup> *For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”*<sup>15</sup> *If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

Last week we saw how Paul emphasised over and over that observance of the Law meant judgment by the Law which condemned because of just a single lapse. Christ was the sacrifice that enabled sinners to be freed from the justifiable legal punishments they deserved. Faith in Jesus justified a man while works or observance of the Law could never justify a man before God because all have sinned and fall short. Circumcision was useless because Christ looks at the heart not the body. Men are saved by grace and faith and not by the works they do. Salvation cannot be earned because it is a gift freely available to all who confess that Jesus is Lord.

*You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?*

Paul knows that at the beginning when he spoke to them and revealed the Gospel they were on the right track. He uses the athletic analogy in other letters, saying life is like a running race which implies there is an end and prize to be had. He asks who led them astray, because somebody or several did lead the Galatians astray... the same Jewish converts who wanted the early church members to remain firmly obedient to the Law of Moses that governed their lives since birth. The old ways, the traditions of their forefathers were entrenched in their thinking as necessary to obey God. But these traditions had no meaning for Greeks and others who grew up in a pagan world where no one knew the Law and the Prophets. Even today, new Christians have trouble with the Old Testament history of the chosen people full of violence, full of disobedience and rebellion against God, and rules for an early Iron Age agricultural society without a controlling government. Others see this as an ideal self-governing society where believers can share land and property without the need of central government. Monasticism grew from this concept but had already been established by the Zealots before Jesus as a way to live when the promised land had been settled and conquered by others. Later Protestant groups such as the Pilgrim Fathers in America, the Mennonites in Russia, and Bruderhof in Germany developed their own way of living based on these ideals first found in the Law of Moses designed for those settling in the promised land. In Britain the Levellers were a failed attempt by some Puritans to work on these principles. We too are bound by church traditions that we like to keep, even though there may be little Biblical justification for them. The hierarchies of ordained men, the buildings, the altars and pews, all the many rules that govern churches that are outside of those few mentioned in the New Testament. Paul questions the Galatians asking who hindered them – the NIV says “cut in”, but the Greek is “hindered” in the sense that the road ahead was broken up to render it impassable in contrast to a clear path ahead. Why were the Galatians finding the road of grace so difficult to follow that they preferred to leave it because the persuasive words of the Judaizers? Today many cannot understand that a free gift doesn’t have a price tag, and somehow there has to be pay back. The

concept of penance requiring acts of self-punishment exists in the wider church which flies in the face of grace, and was what Luther railed against as unbiblical.

<sup>8</sup>*That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.* Paul bluntly says that the Judaizers were not saying what Jesus says, were not saying what Paul told them and as such were plain wrong. In the church today there are things said and adhered to which Jesus wouldn't have said or told us to accept. From the early church onwards, heresies existed. Heresy is denial of the revealed truth in the Bible. Nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher defined it as "*that which preserved the appearance of Christianity, and yet contradicted its essence*". The heresy of the Judaizers was that they wanted Christians to follow the Law of Moses when Christ had set men free of the Law.

<sup>9</sup>*"A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."* This saying is so true. A bad apple spoils the whole barrel. The thin edge of the wedge results in the wood being chopped right through. Step by step moving away from what the Bible says results in the absence of any real belief other than "love your neighbour as yourself" which doesn't need Jesus, doesn't need repentance, doesn't need forgiveness of sin and instead claims that everyone will go to heaven because they are trying to be good people. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. In trying not to offend people, the Gospel may be diluted and bits of the Bible that require a change of heart are omitted in the belief that they might scare people off Christianity. The Holy Spirit convicts sinners, and without Him, the allegedly scary stuff in the Bible is not seen as positive for our own benefit, but rather negative and condemning when our particular lifestyle is being challenged. The early church was riddled with heresies that took hold with alarming rapidity when charismatic and persuasive church leaders declared their opinions were true and their interpretation of the Bible was the right one. Today so many protestant denominations declare their version of church is the right path... they cannot all be right. Yet Paul, and many of us are confident that heresies will be rooted out, and believers who are misled will come to their senses and be guided by the Holy Spirit to follow the way, the life and truth revealed by Jesus, who is God.

<sup>10</sup>*I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.* Paul isn't accusing anyone specifically, but he is warning him or them that there is a penalty or judgment resulting from misleading the flock. Jesus has harsh words for those people in Mark 9:42 *If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.* Misleading the sheep comes with a penalty and unrepentant leaders who teach what is unbiblical and causes those in their care to stumble and go astray will find they will be held to account. The sheep should know the voice of the Shepherd but they are sheep and sheep can be led astray. Paul isn't blaming the sheep. It doesn't matter whether those who mislead do so with good intentions and seek to justify themselves. Every heretic believes he is right – the Judaizers were convinced that they knew best.

<sup>11</sup>*Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been abolished.* The Judaizers claimed that Paul preached circumcision was necessary, and it may be that the early church fathers did likewise otherwise this issue would not be so contentious. After all Timothy was circumcised to make him acceptable as a man who could enter the synagogues and speak about Jesus (Acts 16:1-3 *Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek.* <sup>2</sup>*The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.* <sup>3</sup>*Paul wanted to take him along on the*

*journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.)*

The belief in the Law of Moses can't handle the offence of the cross because a man hung on tree must be a guilty man under a curse. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 <sup>22</sup>*If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death and his body is hung on a tree,* <sup>23</sup>*you must not leave his body hanging on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.* The whole point of Jesus dying on the cross was to say, "You can't save yourself. I must die in your place or you have absolutely no hope at all." The Judaizers who trusted the Law believed that they could, at least in part, save themselves through works and observance of the Law. The offence of the cross is really the glory of the cross, and legalism takes this glory away.

<sup>12</sup>*As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!* Paul is getting carried away a bit here. Apparently worship of some pagan gods involved castration as an act of devotion while circumcision among the Greeks would also be seen as an act of devotion – in this case to the Jewish God. However, Leviticus 19:28 prohibits cutting of body parts. *Priests must not shave their heads or shave off the edges of their beards or cut their bodies.* Deuteronomy 23:1 *No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD.* So emasculation or any other kind of body cutting was forbidden under the Law of Moses for the Levites especially. The Galatians would be familiar with worship of the earth mother goddess Cybele in Phrygia, whose devotees flagellated themselves and offered their testicles to the goddess in return for prophetic gifts. Is it in this case that the "God breathed Scripture" is Paul's rhetoric getting the better of him?

<sup>13</sup>*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*

Paul is back on track. Christians are free from the Law of Moses, free from sin and free from fear of condemnation by God. However, they should not use their freedom to indulge in sensual pleasures, but rather to serve one another with love and humility. Freedom can mean doing what you like and then expecting forgiveness and the freedom to go on sinning and being forgiven. However, Paul means freedom led by Holy Spirit to do what Jesus wants us to do. Paul warns against being self-indulgent and free to sin. What is hinted at here is that the legalism developing among the Galatians had been resulting in bitterness and lust for dominance by one group of believers over the rest who weren't following the Law of Moses. As mentioned last week, love hasn't been mentioned much so far by Paul, but now it is.

<sup>14</sup>*For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."* Taken out of context, this leaves out God! However pretty much all the rules and regulations in the 613 laws of Moses can be summarised by this one command. However, Jesus said in Mark 12:29-31 *'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." <sup>31</sup> The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.'* Loving God is presupposed by Paul so isn't mentioned here. Martin Luther said *"If you want to know how you ought to love your neighbour, ask yourself how much you love yourself. If you were to get into trouble or danger, you would be glad to have the love and help of all men. You do not need any book of instructions to teach you how to love your neighbour. All you have to do is to look into your own heart, and it will tell you how you ought to love your neighbour as yourself."*

Now our final verse for today <sup>15</sup>*If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

Excessive criticism is destructive, so we are told not to do it. Arguments among Christians on theology have resulted in the fragmented church we see today. There may well be good reasons for this fragmentation, but as a witness to the outside world, it contradicts what was said about the early Christians “see how they love one another”. The gospel message has been compromised by division and self-righteous egotism of those who have not loved one another as Jesus tells us to love one another. Somehow a lot of theology, tradition, property, and established interests have led to churches refusing to be united in love in submission to the Holy Spirit of Jesus. Lip service is given to unity. Given that good news is rarely news, the news we do get about churches is full of biting and devouring when one set of believers wants something the others don’t want – and vice versa. Sometimes it is about issues that are fairly clear if it is based on the Bible but often it is about things not in the Bible based on traditions evolved over decades, even centuries and millennia. We have seen the early church as a model when we looked at Acts – believers sharing and worshipping together in harmony. A few decades later, church communities are spreading throughout the Roman empire. Already there are problems which are addressed in the New Testament. Solutions are given and are ignored. Two thousand years later the self-same issues arise and solutions from the Bible are ignored.

What do we take from this passage? Let us love one another and love God following in the footsteps of Jesus obeying all he has commanded us. That can be hard – no one has said that following Christ will be without suffering, without problems, without temptations, but if love prevails over all, we will have our reward and we will have run the race as best we can when we give the glory to God and remain faithful to Jesus.