



Week 8: Freedom to Become Read Galatians 6:7-6:18

This lesson is about three things:

- God's new creation
- Sowing and reaping
- A review of the themes of Galatians

Freedom to...

The saddest scene in the movie "Shawshank Redemption" occurs when Brooks, the old librarian played by the late James Whitmore, is granted parole. He doesn't want to be paroled, and when he is finally set free, he just can't handle it. He takes his own life. Brooks doesn't know what to do with his freedom. Red, the character played by Morgan Freeman, remarks in his smooth narration voice: "These walls are funny. First you hate 'em, then you get used to 'em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them."

These last two chapters of Galatians focus on what we are to do with the freedom we have been offered. So much of the time, we think about what we are to be free **from**. We are set free from people pleasing and the expectations of others. We are set free from jumping through the hoops of religion. We are set free from our futile attempts to be good enough to be accepted by God. We are set free from the guilt of our sin. This is what is called "justification." And all of this is a gift of God, received by faith. But there is a different way to look at freedom, asking what are we free **to** do? What are we free **for**? This approach asks a question about the purpose, the end, of freedom. Consider the moment on your airplane flight when the captain turns off the "fasten seat belt sign." The captain doesn't say, "you are now free from the confines of cramped seat." Instead, the message is "you are now free to move about the cabin." God sets us free for a purpose.

- Imagine a hound dog cut loose from his leash to do what he is meant to do, what he is trained to do: chase down a raccoon!
- Imagine a mother anxious to be released from jail so she can care for her own children.

- Imagine a nation set free from the rule of a foreign king, so that one day, “its alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears.”

We are set free for a purpose. What will we do with that freedom? What is God’s purpose for this grace? Paul’s answer seems to move along two parallel tracks: 1) We are now free to love one another. “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.*” (Galatians 5:6) This was our discussion in our last lesson. 2) We are now free to become, to grow, to be changed, to live as holy people, and to be agents of that transformation throughout creation. The Holy Spirit moves into our lives and changes us and the world in which we live. The works of the flesh are crucified within us. The fruit of the Spirit becomes evident. Paul highlights this transformation in a verse that mirrors 5:6 -- “*For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!*” (Galatians 6:15)

This second track – transformation – is the process that is called “sanctification.” We began the discussion in lesson six, as we discussed the Holy Spirit’s work to free us from flesh and produce the fruit of the Spirit. As Paul approaches the end of this letter, he takes the pen from the scribe who has been writing for him, and writes “see what large letters I am writing in my own hand” as a way of emphasizing the importance of what he is about to say. He rebukes one more time those who have been opposing him, and reminds us again of how sanctification works. As a further development of the opposition of flesh and the Spirit, he shares two other important images to help us understand how this change happens. Note how he offers them together: “*May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!*” (Galatians 6:14-15)

The cross: crucifixion of the old self

I am a lover of poetry, and each year at Christmas, I find myself rereading T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Journey of the Magi.” In 1926, Eliot converted to the Christian faith, and the poem begins with images of his former life, his former self, and concludes with a description of the feeling he has, after his conversion, of being out of place in the same world he lived in before. This poem is his reflection on the verse from the Gospel of Matthew, when after the Magi have met the Christ child, “they returned another way.” I offer the whole poem to you. I hope you will look for the Christian symbolism all through the poem, but pay particular attention to the end.

The Journey of the Magi, by T.S. Eliot

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.*

*Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

*Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.*

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909-1962 (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991).

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Yes, for something new to be born, for there to be a new creation in us and in the world, something old has to die.

St. Paul uses the image of being “crucified with Christ” throughout his letters. In this week’s verses, he writes of the “*cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*” In chapter 5, he writes, “*those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*” (Galatians 5:24) Remember in chapter 2, Paul is autobiographical: “*For through the law I*

died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Galatians 2:19-20)

As Galatians is among Paul’s earliest letters, this concept of being crucified with Christ must have found some traction, because he uses it again in his later letters. In Romans, he explains, “*We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin.*” (Romans 6:6-7) Colossians says, “*If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?*” (Colossians 2:20)

Two things are important to note here. First, this message of crucifixion is consistent with the call of Christ to discipleship. Jesus teaches, “*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)* One of the most poignant verses in John’s gospel narrative comes as Jesus is headed to Jerusalem and the disciples try to stop him. Jesus insists he must go and face the cross. Thomas then says “let us also go, that we may die with him.” Sometimes, I hear people say “Jesus died for our sins so we don’t have to.” This isn’t the message of Jesus at all. We are called to die to self.

Second, we don’t crucify the self by our own strength, but rather our self is crucified with Christ. The crucifixion of self comes through our union, our oneness with Christ Jesus, and a new identity in Christ. The idea of “crucifying the self” is repugnant to many, as we think it has to do with a weak self-image. We like to think of people having a strong sense of self as a good thing. Indeed, it is important that we be “self-differentiated,” in the sense that our thoughts and our emotions are not controlled by those around us, and we are confident enough to stand up and be counted. But the picture we get in Scripture is not a motivational speech that says, “I am important. I am a good person. I am of great value to God.” Rather, this is a bit more like the old coach’s exhortation to the players: “There is no ‘I’ in team.” This is “there is no ‘I’ in Jesus.” (Because there is an “I” in Christ, so that won’t work. And there are two “I’s” in Spirit, so that won’t work either.) We are called to turn our attention away from self, and focus on the Kingdom. As we discussed regarding the “works of the flesh,” the point is that we no longer spend our energy fretting about ourselves, constantly taking our own temperature, but we are secure enough to turn our attention to the needs of others and the work of the Kingdom. Our primary identity is as a part of the body of Christ.

In other parts of Scripture, Paul uses different images when teaching about what we do with the old self. In Colossians, he begins with the idea of dying to the old self, but then changes the metaphor to one of stripping off clothing.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. (Colossians 3:1-10)

In Ephesians, the companion letter to the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul simply says to “put away” the old self: *“You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”* (Ephesians 4:22-24)

In short, there is stuff that has to go. Some of it is stuff that we know is terrible, and we really want to be rid of it. Some of it is stuff that frankly, we would rather keep, somehow believing it is good for us. Too often, we are like the rich young man whom Jesus encountered, told by the Master to sell what he had and give the money to the poor and follow him. His love of money had to die, and the only way to get rid of it was to let the possessions go as well. That man went away sorrowful, because he had great possessions. Personally, I have grown comfortable with my own pathologies, my own desires of the flesh. God has accepted me and loves me just as I am, even with my pathologies. But now that the Spirit has moved in, he is tossing stuff out right and left. The old self is being crucified each and every day.

The New Creation

Paul follows his conversation of crucifixion of the self, the old self, with a phrase we haven’t heard at all in the letter until this moment: the new creation. *“For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”* It is a phrase that is only used twice in Paul’s letters, here and in 2 Corinthians: *“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17) There are three important components to the new creation:

First, a new creation means that we experience resurrection, being raised with Christ, as a rebirth in the here and now. In the last section, we recognized that faith in Christ does not mean that we don’t have to die. Instead, we are called to “die with him.” But that of course isn’t the end of the story. We are also “raised with him.” There is a new life. We are made alive in Christ. There is a rebirth within each of us that is an expression of the Christ living within us.

Paul writes to the Ephesians: *“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...”* (Ephesians 2:4-5) As part of the same passage, Paul uses the same word he does in Galatians when referring to “the new creation,” when he says we were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Paul is not referring to being created at our physical birth, but rather in our new birth, being brought alive again in Christ Jesus. I once heard a preacher begin a sermon with the following: “Many of you have asked an important question; why were you born? I have a more important one. Why were you born again?” In Colossians, Paul writes: *“when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him.”* (Colossians 2:12-13)

The phrase “born again” comes not from Paul, but rather from the Gospel and letters of John. We see the concept arise first in the very beginning of the Gospel, when John describes the purpose of the incarnation, the birth of Jesus as a human being: *“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”* (John 1:12-13) When we believe, we are “born of God.” The image is used again as Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. Jesus answered him,

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’” (John 3:3-8)

Each one of us must make a decision, and in that decision is resurrection, a new birth. Sometimes, that decision happens in a moment, and we can identify clearly a time and place when a choice was made to be a follower of Jesus. Sometimes, it is a decision that grows within us over years, as we come to understand the faith taught us by spiritual parents and grandparents. Sometimes, it is a strong decision of the will. Sometimes, it is a bit more like being swept away by something beyond our control. *The Methodist Visitor*, a magazine for Methodists published in the 19th century in Great Britain, challenges all inquirers: "'Ye must be born again.' Yield to God that he may perform this work in and for you. Admit him to your heart."¹ The rebirth comes in different ways, but at some point we give up and succumb to the grace of God. The question is, in the words of the immortal Lovin' Spoonful, “Did you ever have to make up your mind? Pick up on one and leave the other behind? Did you ever have to finally decide?” At some point, a decision has to be made.

Many years ago, I encountered a moving but uncommon example of just such a decision. I was meeting with a young man and woman who were preparing for their marriage. We were talking about the wedding service, and I invited them to consider what Bible passages they wanted to use in the worship service. I asked them “what message about you and your new family do you want people to take away from the service?” After a pause, the man jumped in and said, “I want people to walk away hearing ‘Leave them alone!’” I laughed, but then I realized neither of them were laughing. Both of them came from families where dysfunction was rampant. There was abuse and abandonment and conflict. The couple went on to share what this wedding service meant to them: “The cycle of hurting others stops right here, on this day. We will not perpetuate it. We have a new family, and this is a new day, and our children will not go through what we went through.” Both bride and groom were active in Al-anon groups, and we talked extensively about the role faith would play in their family, and the realization that the challenge they faced could only be overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit. So, on the day of the wedding service, I preached on 2 Corinthians 5:17—if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old is gone. Everything is made new.

Second, the new creation is an ongoing process, rather than a single moment. We are always being transformed and renewed. We are sometimes skeptical when we hear claims of individuals being “born again.” We look for signs that the old self, the selfish inclinations of the flesh, are still operative in a person’s life. We believe a leopard can’t change his spots – certainly not in an instant! But this view of rebirth is a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching. While regeneration begins with a decision, it continues as an ongoing process throughout our lives.

Consider the following passages from 2 Corinthians: “*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*” (2 Corinthians 4:16) and in the previous

¹ *The Methodist Visitor*. Elliot Stock. London, 62, Paternoster Row, E.C. 1876. p. 137.

verse “*And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*” (2 Corinthians 3:18) In this way, Paul connects the new creation to the whole sanctification of the individual, performed by the Holy Spirit within us.

Have you ever noticed that married couples who live together for decades begin to look like one another? I know, some of you are doubters, but I am convinced. Perhaps it is just that they live by similar lifestyles, so they begin to be shaped by their similar way of life. Or maybe it is that they are subjected to the same life circumstances, so like rocks in the same river, sculpted by the same running water, they begin to resemble one another. More likely, close intimate relationship pulls both of them toward one another, and as their spirits change, their similarly shaped spirits shine through bodies so it seems they even look alike. (This is not a proven scientific theory, by the way. I also think that people often seem to have dogs that share the same characteristics as their masters.) So while it may not be true in the physical world, I do believe it is true in our relationship with God. The longer we remain in close intimate relationship with God, and Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, and God’s breath in the person of the Holy Spirit fill our lungs, the more we begin to be shaped like Christ himself, the Word made flesh. We are being “transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory...”

Third, the new creation points to the Holy Spirit’s agenda as the renewal of all of creation itself. It isn’t only the individual that experiences resurrection and renewal, but all that God has made. In fact, God’s purpose in transforming each of us is so that we can join in creation’s renewal. Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies... (Romans 8:18-23)

The new creation has been “groaning in labor pains” as a new creation is taking place. We, who have the Holy Spirit within us, are waiting until our whole bodies are brought into this new heaven and new earth. Note the parallel to Galatians; Paul says, “*for through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.*” (Galatians 5:5) Here “*the whole creation waits with eager longing*” (Romans 8:19) for the children of God, those who are given new birth, to show up!

Most of the time, the Christian focus, particularly for those of us in the western world, is on the individual. We tell the narrative of Scripture from that perspective. “God made human beings and gave us free will. We sinned, and rebelled against God. That rebellion leads to death. Because of God’s love and justice, God sent his son to save us. Through faith in Christ, we can have eternal life with God, and experience the work of the Holy Spirit in us even now.” It is an appropriate narrative, but it omits an important component. Before God created the human being, God created the earth and everything in it. God created the human being with a purpose: he put the man and the woman in the garden to be stewards of paradise. Our sin and rebellion have brought not only death to us individually, but brokenness with our neighbor, wars and rumors of wars, and decay to creation as a whole.

The new creation is the answer to that decay. The prophets spoke of a time when

*“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.”* (Isaiah 58:12)

and

*“For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.”* (Isaiah 65:17)

It is this promise of renewal and new creation that the Holy Spirit enables us to be a part of. God will do this holy work, and our own re-creation joins us to that work, and enables us to live as part of the Kingdom of God in the here and now, anxiously awaiting its fulfillment. 2 Peter points us to it this way: *“But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”* (2 Peter 3:13) For more discussion and description of the doctrine of regeneration, the new birth, and of the concept of a new creation as a whole, take a look at the Sunday School Words at the end of the lesson.

Sowing and Reaping

When we say that the Holy Spirit is the agent of transformation and is the power behind sanctification, we must be careful not to imply that transformation is easy, or that we have no part in it. Paul turns again to a strong claim: *“God is not mocked!”* (Galatians 6:7) This is the only place in the Bible that this word “mocked” is used. The Greek means to turn up one’s nose at someone, to disdain or deride them. It is actually a derivative of the word “nostril.” In other words, if I turn up my nose at a relationship with God, then God won’t break through my mockery and change my life anyway. If I turn away from God, then God won’t grab me and turn me back around. God will never take away our free will. We can always reject God and God’s Spirit.

Paul uses a beautiful image of sowing and reaping to talk about our part in God’s work. Sowing is our part, and it is the easiest part of the farming work. Cultivation takes work – lots of it. Harvest takes work. But sowing was simply a matter of spreading the seed. The word literally means “to scatter,” and denotes a shallow distribution of seed. A different word is used for planting something more deeply into the soil. The farmer sows. But the farmer, after the sowing, does little to make the crop grow. God provides the rain. God provides the soil. God provides the sunshine. And God provides the amazing magic of a tiny kernel of wheat breaking open and becoming a seedling and then becoming a stalk and then a head, white and ready for harvest. All of it without the sower’s labor.

Nonetheless, the sower has to sow the seed.

Paul’s point with this image is two-fold. First, a sower does have to sow, and if we long for sanctification in our lives, and if we eagerly await the transformation of the world, we do have a part to play. We must open ourselves to the Holy Spirit through faith. We have to take the step in the right direction. The Christian word that is used is “repent.” When John the Baptist preaches about Jesus coming to save us

from our sin, his message is “the kingdom of God is available (literally ‘at hand’)” and “believe the good news.” But John’s whole message is “*repent*, and believe the good news.” The first step, the seed sowing, is repentance, turning to face that new direction.

Here is another image. Sometimes, in the summer, I go to a waterpark with the kids and grandkids. I have grown too old to plummet down the waterslides, but I enjoy the “lazy river.” (The adjective “lazy” resonates with my soul.) The river reminds me a bit of the Holy Spirit. The current carries us forward, floating on our inner tubes. But there are many places where small whirlpools develop, and I find myself simply spinning in circles. And there are other places where there are wide pools to the side, out of the current. I have to work to stay in the current, to look for the places where it is moving fast and strong, and paddle over and join in. And most of all, the first thing I have to do, if I am to enjoy the ride, is to get into the river at the outset! Yes, God will make the crop grow, and the harvest will be amazing. God will change our lives. But we have to sow the seeds.

Second, if we are looking for sanctification, Paul says we must sow to the Spirit and not to the flesh. There is a direct correlation between the kind of seed we sow and the harvest we receive. To sow to the flesh means to try things on our own strength. To sow to the flesh means to take steps that tap into the lower selfish nature in our lives. What we will reap is either success (see how good I am) or failure (see how bad I am.) Both of them are all about the self, the flesh, and are self-focused and self-absorbed.

So how do we sow to the Spirit, turning away from self toward God and others? Here are some ideas for seeds to sow; perhaps you can think of others.

- Do something small for someone else, without letting anyone know about it.
- Join in the work of a ministry or a non-profit, even if part of that work isn’t really satisfying.
- Pray, and in your prayers, pray only prayers of adoration of God and intercession for others. Forget about thanksgiving for what God has done for you, confession for how you have missed the mark, and petition for yourself. Spend a week or two just praying adoration and intercession. Sow a seed toward God and others.
- Worship God, and approach worship not as something you get (*that was a good worship service; I liked the message and music*) but rather something you offer to God.

It is amazing how God can take a small seed or two, and out of it an amazing crop can grow.

Summary

To close, let’s summarize again what we learned about Paul’s letter to the Galatians:

- 1) It was addressed to the churches Paul had planted on his first missionary journey, written from Antioch of Syria. Both Antioch and the Galatian churches had many Gentiles participating, and God was doing amazing things in those churches.
- 2) Paul’s own experiences of the Law’s failures, the transformation in his own life, a special revelation he received, and the amazing signs and wonders God was doing among the Gentiles were the foundation of his own message and theology.

- 3) Paul taught that we are justified by grace, a gift from God, received through faith in Jesus. We are set free from the works of the law, and returning to them is slavery. The teachers in both Antioch and Galatia teaching otherwise are false teachers.
- 4) Paul taught that Jews and Gentiles were both justified the same way, so Gentiles should not convert to Judaism and follow Jewish laws or be circumcised in order to be Christians. He and the apostles in Jerusalem worked this out when he visited there.
- 5) He understood that faith was God's original intention, because Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Paul interprets Genesis to mean that Abraham's heir is Jesus, so the promise to Abraham is extended to all of us through Jesus, and faith in him. Through that faith, we are all adopted into God's promise to his family.
- 6) The Law served as a guardian for us until Christ came, and now serves to help us see our need for grace.
- 7) Once we are justified by faith, the Holy Spirit moves in, and we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit.
- 8) We cannot change ourselves; we can only surrender to the Spirit's agenda and work in us.
- 9) The primary fruit and mark of the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ is love.
- 10) The old self, the flesh, is crucified with Christ, and the new creation in each of us, and in the world, are brought about by the Holy Spirit.

The significance of this letter, and the issues and decisions this letter describes, cannot be overestimated in terms of their significance in the life of the church over the centuries. The amazing movement of God uniting Jews and Gentiles in the church in Antioch, Paul's immersion and influence there, the launching of Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys, the controversy and ultimate settlement of the issue regarding circumcision with the apostles, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, the explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit to sanctify both individuals and creation, and the evidence of that sanctification in love... all of these are the basic tenets of the Christian faith that we practice today. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we seek to apply these important teachings to the world we live in 2,000 years later.

Sunday School Word Dictionary

Spend enough time in church or with Christians and you will run across some words that we don't use frequently in our normal day-to-day conversation. However, these concepts are important for understanding Paul's letter and the Christian faith. Each week, we will examine a few of these "Sunday school words" so that they may shed light on the context of the lesson.

New Creation

The specific term "new creation" occurs only twice in the New Testament (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). New Creation in the New Testament can refer both to our individual selves but the early church also believed in the ultimate renovation or re-creation of the heavens and the earth at the close of history (2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1-5). Paul writes of the creation's longing to be set free from the futility and bondage to decay, to which is linked the promise of the completion of redemption (Rom 8:19-22). The passage in Galatians shows that the issue was about what was the proper grounds for boasting. To base one's boast

on one's confidence in the rite of circumcision or one's refusal to be circumcised amounted to reliance on "the flesh," or in this case on a ceremony or ritual. Paul's point is that these things provide no grounds for confidence; only Christ's death in our behalf is sufficient (5:12-14). Verse 15 then restates this: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything" (NRSV). In Paul's logic, the death of Christ stands parallel with the "new creation." The old creation would be represented by life in the flesh (1:1, 10-12; 2:16; 6:1). The new creation is characterized by all that participation in Christ's death and affords new life from death "in Christ."

Regeneration

This word literally means a "new birth." The Greek word so rendered (*palingenesia*) is used by classical writers with reference to the changes produced by the return of spring. In Matthew 19:28 the word is equivalent to the "restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21). In Titus 3:5 it denotes that change of heart elsewhere spoken of as a passing from death to life (1 John 3:14); becoming a new creature in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17); being born again (John 3:5); a renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2); a resurrection from the dead (Ephesians 2:6); a being quickened (Ephesians 2:1 Ephesians 2:5). This change is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. It originates not with man but with God (John 1:12 John 1:13; 1 John 2:29; 1 John 5:1 1 John 5:4). As to the nature of the change, it consists in the implanting of a new principle or disposition in the soul; the impartation of spiritual life to those who are by nature "dead in trespasses and sins." According to Paul's theology in Galatians, salvation has begun now in the present age; the renewal, which is to affect the entire universe, and has begun in the hearts and lives of those who respond to the gospel.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What have you been set free from and what will you do with that freedom?
2. Looking back on Dr. Pace's review of the series, which week spoke to you the most with regards to what we are freed from?
3. What images or emotions does the poem Dr. Pace referenced in this week's reading evoke in you?
4. What does it mean to die to our old selves and be reborn in Christ?
5. What is something in your life today that needs redeeming? What are you holding back from God?
6. What is something in our world today that needs redeeming?
7. What are the three most important components to the phrase "New Creation?"
8. How can you personally "sow to the Spirit" over the next few weeks?
9. When you reflect on the themes of Paul's letter to the Galatians, what has stayed with you?



Week 8: Freedom to Become Daily Readings

Week 8: Day 1 - Matthew 13:1-9

Commentary: This well-known parable explains to the reader why some people receive the word of God differently than others. The same seed is scattered everywhere just as the truth of the Gospel does not change throughout time or circumstance, but not everyone hears and believes in it. People who do not understand the gospel message will have a difficult time being transformed by it. Those who have a deep emotional conversion to the faith, but find little to no depth in their life with Jesus will find their faith withering away. A farmer does not make the seed grow but does have some responsibility in positioning that seed in a way that will help make growth happen. Our faith is the same way, God's grace is responsible for our transformation, but we are two join into that work with God. Filling ourselves with the love of Christ as we grow in our relationship with him.

Reflection Question: What are you sowing in your life these days? Does what you hope to reap reflect this?

Week 8: Day 2 - John 16:12-16

Commentary: Jesus is getting ready to leave his disciples and go to the cross. Even though they don't fully understand what is to come, Jesus is reassuring them that they will not be left alone. Jesus tells them when the Holy Spirit comes he will come revealing the same truth of the Gospel that he has taught them. In this way we can trust that the Holy Spirit will always line up with the other two members of the Trinity. At the end of the scripture Jesus tells the disciples that even though he will go away for a time when he dies, they will see him again when he is glorified.

Reflection Question: Have you ever felt like you have heard something from God? If God was to say something to you right now what might it be?

Week 8: Day 3 - Colossians 1:9-12

Commentary: As we grow in our relationship with God there is a real change in the way that we see the world. As we gain spiritual wisdom and we love God, we will find ourselves reacting to trials or life stressors differently than we might have before. The fruit that comes from a life filled with Jesus is not necessarily an easier life, but a more content one. As we love God more we will love ourselves and others more, giving us the peace and patience to endure with joy the trials that await us in life.

Reflection Question: What is something that is currently life draining for you? Ask God to give you perseverance and peace in this area of trial.

Week 8: Day 4 - 1 Corinthians 6:11-12

Commentary: We are justified by our faith in Jesus Christ but our salvation does not end there. When we believe we are counted as righteous, but we still have sin in our life. This means that at the point in which we accept Jesus we are saved from the penalty of sin, but likely still struggle with the power our sin has over our daily lives. Jesus' sanctifying grace begins to create a real change in our lives by removing the power that sin has over us so that we may be free in the Holy Spirit. Freedom means that we no longer are a slave to the things that used to bind and destroy us. Salvation is completed in us when we become the very person that God has created us to be, by allowing our lives to be fully redeemed through our relationship with Jesus.

Reflection Question: What are you in danger of "being dominated by?" How can you find real freedom this week from whatever may be enslaving you?

Week 8: Day 5 - 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

Commentary: Many of us are tempted to find our identity in our accomplishments, for us to be worth anything we must succeed at something. The Gospel message flies in the face of this common cultural understanding. In Jesus we have a new identity, one that is not based on what we have or have not done, but on what Christ has done through us. This is the freedom of the gospel, you are not defined by your failures or your past mistakes. Your old identity died on the cross with Jesus so lay it down and put on the message of reconciliation. Then carry that message of freedom to the rest of the world.

Reflection Question: When you think about your identity what is the first thing that comes to mind? Are you resting in God's grace or still trying to earn your acceptance through your actions?