

# Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom is an intoxicating idea. When we are growing up we long for the day when we can make our own choices and not be under parental control. When we become adults we discover that the freedom we so longed for has repercussions as we experience social pressures and the consequences of our choices. Then we begin to long for those golden retirement years when no one will tell us what to do, and then we revisit the burdens of the past and wish we could redo life! Isn't freedom great?!



**Michael K. Olmsted**

Paul has been teaching about the freedom of faith in Christ in contrast to keeping the Law to earn God's favor. The pattern of rewards for works is hard to overcome. We sow what we reap! Everybody knows that. But when Paul gets to today's segment of his Galatian letter he helps us understand how to experience freedom in living as God's children while we help others along the path of faith.

Galatians 5 challenges us to serve one another in love and embody the fruit of the Spirit. Chapter 6 presents spiritual freedom that finds expression in caring for others while we grow deeper in faith. We all make mistakes, but too often our perspective is "us" instead of "others." The result, even within the family of God, is to point out failures and disregard our ministry of forgiveness and healing. Our text describes "a person caught doing something wrong" (v. 1). The word Paul uses (*paraptoma*) means to stumble or slip rather than deliberately doing something wrong. But we are quick to judge and condemn a fellow believer when they do something questionable.

What happens to a child who grows up in a family where every mistake and misdeed is recorded and punished, where there is little compassion or encouragement to learn a better way? The results are often hopelessness, lack of self-worth, anger and fear. Contrast that with a family that forgives and teaches a better way, using love instead of condemnation to nurture one another. Paul says that when someone in our church family does something wrong, "you who are spiritual should

restore someone like this with a spirit of gentleness" (v. 1). The word Paul uses for "restore" can mean "to repair" or a medical term for "setting a broken limb." The emphasis is not on judgment but making the person whole and able to function as a Christian. He is careful to remind us as we look at others, "Watch out for yourselves so you won't be tempted too" (v. 1).

"Carry each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (v. 2). Again the contrast of the heavy obligations of the Law is replaced by the forgiveness and love of Christ. God in Christ has loved us, not because we are so helpless and broken that he wants to control us, but because he knows what we can become and experience when his grace shapes our heart. God sees what no one else can see. God may grieve over our sins, use circumstances and failure to teach us and touch our hearts with remorse, but he will always welcome us home like the prodigal son (Lk.15:11-32)!

Paul refers to bearing burdens in life twice: 1) "carry each other's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (v. 2); and "Each person will have to carry their own load" (v. 5). The first means that we will all face the same challenges and weaknesses, so we must remember to encourage and help one another. The second burden (load) is the common word for a soldier's backpack. There are some burdens we must carry alone, experiences of life that only faith in God can get us through. And, there are times when we can only overcome and find a new starting place with the powerful presence of Christ. These burdens may be failure unknown to others, the loss of a loved one or physical affliction. The Apostle Peter also counsels us "(to cast) all your anxiety on (Christ) because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Paul moves on to another area of relationships, this time within the church structure. There were often stark social contrasts in those early churches, where wealthy members rubbed shoulders with servants and slaves. We do not know the specifics, except this single comment, "Those who are taught the word should share all good things with their teachers" (v. 6). Were there teachers who did not have enough to support themselves and their families? Paul moves on quickly to point out the economy of God in all

## Formations

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Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10

of life: "Make no mistake, God is not mocked. A person will harvest what they plant" (v. 7). When I was a very young preacher beginning college, I was advised to get a teaching degree so I could always make a living! Was that practical caution speaking or an assessment of my potential?

Paul reminds us that life has a kind of balance that nature illustrates: planting and harvest. Your life choices, priorities and actions all result in the final outcome of your life. Selfishness produces devastation, "but those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life from the Spirit" (v. 8). This may sound simplistic, but those early Galatian Christians had only known religions of fear and uncertainty, desperately hoping their sacrifices would gain positive attention from capricious deities who themselves had no moral standards. Now they knew the God who truly loved them and had sent his Son to make that love unmistakably clear in Christ. Paul urges them, "Let's not get tired of doing good, because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up" (v. 4). What you believe, what you do, what you give yourself to matters. Weariness and failure may drag you down, but there is always another day with the hope of Christ and help of God's Spirit. Paul knew it well. From the moment he answered Jesus' invitation Paul had no permanent home, no easy lifestyle, no quiet relief from hardship and threats. Was he ever weary? Did he ever want to give up? No! So far as we know he never returned to the Galatian church. His final journey to Rome probably ended his life, although he had plans to plant churches in Spain.

We are not all like this incredible man, but in our small part of the world, in our community and church, in our ordinary days, we meet people, discover ways to love and help others and share the love of Christ. "Let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity," whether we are within or outside the church. Ours is more than a responsibility ... it is the gift of freedom to share Christ!

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*