

7-7-07: Fruit of the Spirit

Last week we talked about Galatians 5 with a focus on Paul's use of the term "fruit of the spirit"; I feel like we're not quite done with this passage for two reasons. So we'll look at it harder.

First reason: Paul teaches absolutely that the only criteria for a relationship with God is to walk in the spirit, nothing else applies except "faith working through love" (verse 6). In Romans Paul says more or less the same thing, "we are saved by grace through faith." Anything else is a lesser gospel and some of the Galatians were being seduced by a lesser gospel, the message that they had to become Jews and be circumcised before they could be full Christians. Paul despised their message; he wrote, "Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves" (verse 12). Well, here's the problem for now: a lot of churches that think they are Christ-centered are preaching a lesser gospel, distorting the truth of Jesus' message, putting people into bondage while breeding whole congregations full of smug and sometimes self-righteous people. As a result of this, the church has lost most of its authority in the world as a force for real decency and change. This is the catastrophe in the church that I wrote about last week: when we think about real moral authority in the world, who thinks about the church?

This sure applies to gays and lesbians. Paul knew nothing about gays and lesbians as we experience our lives. I would definitely wager that if he knew any gays, men or women living regular lives, most wanting to be in healthy relationships, he would not consider it an issue. I think he would definitely rebuke the fundamentalist excluders, rebuking them for focusing on issues other than faith and God's grace, taking upon themselves the role of God who is the only One who knows who is and is not acceptable.

The second reason is that Paul clearly teaches, here and in Romans, that the antidote to the disastrous human condition is the leading of the Holy Spirit: "But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (verse 16). But living a life that's acceptable in God's sight is not a free-ride. Paul argues that we are called upon to rein in the "deeds of the flesh," listing some of them in verses 19 and 20 and he says that continued practice of these will bear a consequence: they will "not inherit the kingdom of God" (verse 21). As we take a look at this list, you'll see that all of the behaviors mentioned are violations of our relationship with God (idolatry and sorcery) or violations of the integrity of the Christian fellowship (all the others). Paul's letter to the Galatians is about individual integrity and a life that is spiritually productive in the context of the fellowship. Paul hated seeing behaviors that undermined the church's message. Paul's message doesn't condemn, it informs us that we live in a world with standards, God's standards, and they don't restrict or condemn us, they actually free us from compulsive and addictive behaviors that pretty often seem like fun but leave us feeling hollow. It's a little bit difficult to teach about this without sounding judgmental but the New Testament message is really about liberation, freedom in the spirit to be people who honor ourselves and others, people whose lives contribute something meaningful. That's our message here, freedom in Christ. "Set me free, Jesus." Amen