

Cannibalism versus community

Galatians 5:7-15

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⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

In Galatians 5:7-15 we find Paul calling the Galatians back to the gospel of faith that he had preached to them initially. Like runners, they had started out so well, but now someone had "cut in on them." The false teaching, that they were listening to, did not agree with everything else that they had been taught about the gospel.

The false teaching did not line up with the theology of Christ and scripture. It didn't have the "doctrinal fingerprints of God" on it. How many times have we heard a teaching that from a human perspective sounded logical or inviting, but in the end it was not biblical at all? We must be "Berean" and evaluate what we hear with scripture (Acts 17:11).

In Acts 17 we see Paul and Silas arrive in Berea and begin teaching in the Jewish synagogues. It then says, *“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”* They would hear Paul speak and then would look to scripture to see if it was correct. This should be our example. As we read Christian books, attend Bible study, read Christian blogs or listen to sermons we should continually use scripture as our test for verifying the truth of what we receive.

Correct biblical teaching will always line up with the doctrines of scripture and what we know of God’s character. It is similar to a situation I faced several years ago. I received an email that claimed to be from a friend of mine. It told how he was in trouble in London and needed me to send money to help him. It just didn’t sound like him. I investigated and found out that it was not true. Someone had hacked my email and was trying to steal from me. The reason I was suspicious is because it didn’t sound like something my friend would say. It wasn’t the way he writes. It didn’t agree with who I knew him to be.

In a similar way we must be careful to guard against false teaching. We must dedicate ourselves to knowing God’s Word and His character well. We then will be able to recognize falsehood when it does not agree with who we know God to be.

For example, some false teachers promise wealth and a pain free life, while Christ calls us to generosity, simplicity and promises suffering to those who will follow Him. Some false teachers seek to control their listeners with guilt and fear, while Christ promises mercy and grace to all will come to him with humble hearts. Others promise that salvation is for all, but scripture only offers it to those who repent and believe.

The false teachers claimed that Christ was not enough. To be a Christian, one needed to follow Jesus and also had to obey numerous Jewish rules and regulations. To some it might have seemed like a small addition, but in reality it was a huge difference that would lead to destruction. One could not trust in their own good works while also trusting in the works of Christ. What seemed to be a small addition was more like leaven that starts small but then spreads throughout the entire dough. One had to either choose to believe salvation through faith or turn their back on the gospel and believe in the law.

Paul was confident in the Lord that the Galatians, who were truly in Christ, would not be led astray. We see the basis of this confidence in John 16:13, *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”* He loved the Galatians, but Paul’s confidence was in the Lord who guides those who are His into the truth.

Paul then argued to show that his motive was not selfishness. If he preached what the false teachers preached, then he would not be persecuted. But instead he preached the cross and Christ crucified that offended the Jews and brought suffering.

Paul then ends this segment of verses by saying that the false teachers should even emasculate themselves. It was likely a comparison to the priests and devout worshippers of the local pagan goddess

Cybele who would castrate or neuter themselves. Their choosing to live under the law would have the same eternal outcome as those pagans who followed Cybele.

Now that the Galatians had been called to freedom, Paul exhorted them to use their freedom to serve one another, not to serve their selfish desires. It would be similar to a former slave who had been adopted into a family. In the times of the Roman Empire an adopted child could never be put aside. Adoption was for life. Even though the adopted child now had total security, he should not go out and behave badly, taking advantage of the situation. He should instead behave out of gratitude for the love he has been shown.

As followers of Christ we have been forgiven of sin. We have received freedom found in love. Now, may we use this love to draw near to God. As our needs are met in Him we are freed to no longer look out for our own concerns, but to focus on the needs of others. May we each receive the truths of the gospel that spur us on to a greater love of our fellow man.

“The whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus had also shared this truth in Matthew 22:36-40. It was a horizontal love for others that was first rooted in a vertical love for God. It is a love that emerges from a true understanding of the gospel. Our needs are met in Christ, so we are free to love others. The other option is to live under the curse of the law. This breeds only judgment, insecurity and judgment for others. Paul says it this way, *“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”*

Legalism leads to relational cannibalism. Legalism exalts law over grace and replaces faith with works. For the legalist, his focus is on “being made right with God by obeying God’s rules.” That can only end one of two ways. One can see himself as self-righteous and deserving of God’s love. This leads to pride. The other option is to fall into sin, failing to live up to God’s standards. This results in living a life of defeat, fear and guilt, defeat and competition.

By contrast, when we are fully convinced that we are terrible sinners who must wholly trust in Christ’s righteousness alone before God, the result is a Christ-like life. Humility and gratitude now characterize our hearts. We are gracious because we have received grace. We are merciful because we have received mercy. We no longer judge others because we see our sin. We are indebted to Christ and now are motivated to love others because His Spirit lives in us. For, just as Christ condescended to our weakness and bore our burdens so we might share in His righteousness, we understand the grace given us in Him, and rejoice, that we should do likewise and condescend to each other’s weaknesses and bear each other’s burdens, not add to them. It is a joyful giving of oneself because another, namely Christ, has given of himself so that we might be saved!

This was what the brother of the prodigal did when he criticized his own Father for rewarding his brother despite his brother’s failure to do what he himself had been doing (Luke 15:29-30). At root, legalism, no less than lawlessness, is a view of salvation which exchanges the truth of God for a lie, because the person ends up worshipping the creature (him, herself, or others) more than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

So the choice is cannibalism or community. We must often examine ourselves and ask ourselves whether we are not falling into this same deception.

If we bring ourselves back to the gospel at the beginning of every day, we are humbled by our sin, our sinfulness and our brokenness. Pride is swept away and we no longer think more highly of ourselves. As Jesus instructs us to do in Matthew 7, we first take note of the log of sin in our own eye before we judge the speck in someone else's eye. As we once again have been reminded of the "bad news" we then are lifted up with the good news. We have been forgiven. We are loved. We have been adopted. We are secure. Christ is in us and we are in Him. We no longer have to earn love or perform for the approval of man. We can stand strong, even in the most humiliating and debilitating of circumstances, because it cannot steal our strength, our joy, our hope or our peace. All of these now come from within. We are in Christ. Our Father treasures us, cares for us, provides for us and loves us. We are secure. . . So we no longer need to devour each other, or put others down to raise ourselves up, or brag about what we have done so everyone knows, or be broken if we don't succeed in some earthly endeavor. Our lives are built upon the rock, and though storms may come and floods may rise, we are held firm on the foundation of Christ.

Because our needs are met in Him, we can now quit using people and just love them as Christ has loved us. That is the beauty of the gospel. The vertical love relationship with God spreads throughout all of our relationships for His glory and our good. May we keep the gospel before us and be blessed by the perspective it provides.

- **How can I remind myself daily of the truths of the Gospel?**
- **In what relationships do I need to love better?**
- **What relationships do I need to make right?**
- **What else might God be teaching you today?**