

Sermon on Galatians 5, 25+26; 6, 1-10, 24.09.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

Galatians 5, 25+26

25)If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. 26)Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another.

Galatians 6, 1-10

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2)Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. 3)For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4)But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour. 5)For each man will have to bear his own load. 6)Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches. 7)Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. 8)For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. 9)And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. 10)So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially those who are of the household of faith.

Dear Congregation,

Some of these verses we know, we have heard them before. For instance "Bear one another's burdens", or "Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap". There are ideas in this text which we know through other connections in the Bible, for instance, that we should admonish each other within the congregation, but should do it with love, or that one should pay attention to oneself in terms of wrongdoing, or, as it says here "temptations", before we reproach others; this reminds us of what Jesus has said, that one should first see the log in one's own eye before one points out the speck in a fellow believer's eye.

I think that we can all understand this quite readily, and, as mentioned, recognize some of it. Whether we act accordingly, is a very different question. Still: There is not much that is new in this paragraph of Paul's letter, and I actually do not want to preach about how we deal with these admonitions.

What interests me much more is something that comes only into view within the context of this letter. The observations of a few commentators on this text help me to realize, that, before reading these admonitions, one has to understand first, why Paul actually writes this letter and what is, so to speak, the framework which holds these admonitions together.

To clarify this, I give you some background information now and we will find out, that there can be something which can trouble people more than the burden of trespasses or the burden of responsibility. Which burden this is, I will tell you later.

Paul writes to congregations in Galatia; where this is situated, whether in the north or south of today's Turkey, is a much disputed topic, but it is really not so important. Important is that Paul, because he becomes ill, must interrupt his missionary travels and stay in a village in the region of Galatia. Typically for Paul, he preaches and does missionary work during this stay. This happens probably in the year 49 after Christ. He returns four years later and observes that the enthusiasm of the beginning for faith and also for him as a missionary, has turned into something very different: There is criticism

for his authority as a preacher, there is reproach that he represents a human rather than a godly message. In the meantime, preachers had come through the congregations; who they actually were, is still disputed in theology. It is a fact that those have tried to force new rules upon people and demanded the circumcision of men as a sign of their faith affiliation.

Paul is shocked. How can people be taken in when others tell them: Only when you celebrate certain feast days and let yourself be circumcised, only when you adhere to certain rules and practice your faith according to regulations, only then are you a believer.

Paul is disappointed that people could regard him as a self-made announcer of a human message. Therefore, he writes at the very beginning (Chapter 1):

1) Paul an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead...

Paul is angry because people let themselves be turned away from the Gospel by preachers (Chapter 1):
6)I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel, 7)not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8)But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.

He then explains that his mission work has been discussed and expressly approved by the other apostles. He wants to clarify once again that it is, indeed, not the law nor some regulations that justify men, but faith. (Chapter 3):

13)Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.

And he makes it very clear that faith stands above the law, and that people who live in faith do not live in a two-class society. (Chapter 3):

26)For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 27)For as many of you were baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. 28)There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

He warns not to fall back onto the old laws (Chapter 5):

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!

Though this introduction was perhaps somewhat lengthy, it is important to me that you see this connection: To Paul, faith means freedom. And what you can learn from the Letter to the Galatians is, how difficult it can be for us humans, to deal with this freedom in faith. The burden, of which I want to speak today, is the burden of being free.

During Bible study this week, we have looked at the two extreme ways, in which people react to this freedom:

Some say: “Finally, no more rules! Finally, I myself can determine what I do. No one can tell me anything regarding questions of faith. Therefore, I live the way *I* want to live.” – The result of this attitude is, that people no longer care at all about the support and advice of the Bible how to live in harmony with God and fellow man. The tendency is called self-realization, even though this, in an extreme case, has nothing at all to do with the biblical message.

The other extreme is, that people are fearful of having freedom in faith. "What do I do with it?" some ask, and the answer of our time is actually that people submit again to a new yoke of slavery and search for churches and preachers and denominations, which prescribe in detail what they ought to believe, ought to do or not to do. The boom of Evangelistic, and, indeed, not Evangelical churches, can be precisely explained by the fact that it is easier for people to be told what is good and right, also what is good and right in faith, than to find out by themselves.

In the meantime, who would have thought of it 10 or 20 years ago, that we live in a religious era again, which, however, is marked by an atmosphere that Paul condemns in the Letter to the Galatians.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery! And yet, hundreds of thousands of people let one yoke after another be placed upon their shoulders. I have said it once before, recently: After all the struggles of the Reformation, to finally win back a Biblical theology, free from rules made by people, we have, in less than 500 years, forgotten everything and have allowed ourselves, as far as faith is concerned, to be declared incapacitated.

Our problem is that we do not truly know what to do with our freedom in faith. What that means is namely, that you and I must explore what a life in this world with Christ must look like. Not everything is written in the Bible. Much also depends on how we deal with what we know of God and what we read in the Bible. A liberated faith must no longer be afraid of God, because our sin, from which we cannot free ourselves, has been eliminated through Christ's death on the cross. Nothing stands between God and ourselves any more. We can be certain that he loves us. And we do not become better people by slavishly observing food restrictions or wear a head scarf.

But though we have little to worry whether God loves us, the more we still have to try to live in harmony with God. Once more: We do not achieve this by following rules, but by loving God back. To love God includes always, at least in Christian faith, the neighbour, the fellow Christian, the fellow man. I simply claim here now, that one can probably tell how much we truly love God by the way we treat others. In our Protestant faith everything depends on following the "Highest Commandment", to love God and the neighbour.

Just a moment, are we not actually liberated, why then follow a commandment? Does that not enslave us anew under some laws?

Two things you must understand, dear Congregation: Freedom does not mean to do as one pleases. The fact that God is merciful to us and loves us, does not mean that we can do what we like. Freedom, and this is, as said before, the other pole of the problem of misunderstanding faith today, always includes the freedom of the other person, too. I cannot wish for freedom for myself and not grant it to others. I cannot live liberated and, at the same time, fall back into the state of a life in sin. When I love God, because he has loved me first, I will search for things that can help me to live in freedom, without being in fear of God, and at the same time also with responsibility towards my fellow men.

This, without question, does not always just happen, but we should try in earnest, otherwise we come to what Bonhoeffer has called "Cheap Mercy". This means: I take from God everything that I can get and give nothing back, no love, no gratitude, no mercy towards others.

Freedom also means: To think about things, to grow in faith. Paul has written down rules, and hoped they would lead people to think about how faith in God, in the Christian sense, can take form. Love of a neighbour, translated, can look like this:

- *Dear brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness*
- *Bear one another's burdens*
- *Let each one test his own work*
- *Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap*
- *Let us do good to all men, and especially those who are of the household of faith.*

The point of the theology in opposition to the people against whom he fights is this:

His opponents say: When you follow such and such rules, only then are you a good Christian.

And Paul says: Because you believe in God, you are a Christian, and because you are a Christian, you will also want to do good deeds.

What he writes here, too, is: Faith means to live in God's Spirit. And the fruits of this faith, of this life in God's Spirit, are: Love, joy, peace, patience, friendliness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, chastity. This, however, is the result of faith, and not the reason why we believe.

Dear Congregation, rules, laws, regulations, do not make a good Christian of every person even when it is about faith. The sign of the Christians is the cross, which tells of God's boundless love for people and that he does not condemn, but has decided on mercy. Let us do something with the freedom which God has given us thereby. Let us not live as if we knew nothing of God. However, let us not live as if others did not matter to us. Yet, whatever we do, let us hold fast to this dearly acquired freedom in faith. Let us stand fast, when we are challenged and bear the responsibility for how our life is formed through faith.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!

And the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.