

5TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST ~ July 1, 2007

2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77: 1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5: 1, 13-25; Luke 9: 51-62

“The Letter Or The Spirit?”

I read a story this week about someone who questioned what he was being told. He questioned authority – probed the law, researched the issue, challenged popularly held beliefs. And he was soundly punished for it too. The story caught my attention in part because it has to do with a teenage boy and there is no doubt that as a mother of two teenagers – two excellent young men in the making – I have a certain enthusiasm for them and their kind.

This student in Grade 10 is by the accounts I’ve read a good student with a keen mind and some willingness to take initiative. After an anti-drug presentation at his school he wondered if the presentation was perhaps a bit one-sided so he decided to do some research of his own. What he discovered is not really news to most of us – marijuana, while a dangerous and illegal drug, is considered by many to be less harmful than tobacco or alcohol – less harmful to individuals and to our society.

This enterprising young man doesn’t advocate the use of any of these drugs as far as the reports I’ve read indicate. He just thinks a balanced view should be presented and that the topic bears discussion. For this he was bullied by the school administrator, falsely accused and harassed by police, suspended from school and consequently unable to write his exams which seriously affected his marks. It seems that society’s response is all about law and order – power and oppression.

This is the same philosophy that results in over reactions like “no fly lists”, artificially low speed limits and fence height regulations that penalize a family trying to keep safe. It is what I refer to as lowest common denominator thinking – that which is focused on rules – the letter rather than the intent or spirit of the law.

Perhaps this is a little political for some and you may wonder how it relates to our scripture for the day. Paul is always talking about just this sort of thing: *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* The yoke of slavery to which Paul refers in this message to the Galatians and throughout his letters, is slavery to the law of Israel – obedience without understanding – compliance without passion.

Paul says the same thing that the prophets have been saying all along through the whole of Biblical history: “God does not desire blind obedience and empty worship. God is not interested in how many times you pray or your attentiveness to the minutia of the law. The law is intended to enhance relationship – with God and with others. If it fails to do that it is nothing more than a burden and a distraction.”

Paul, like the student questioning the class presentation, suggests that things have been a bit one-sided. He advocates being led by the Spirit, not so that the law will be ignored but so that it can be fulfilled as Christ intends – so that the complexities of the law can be truly understood as *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.”*

Paul goes on and on about the choice between grace and law. There are those who wonder if there is any way to make this issue relevant for us today but so much of what I read and hear in the news tells me that Paul’s message is as significant as ever. We live in a culture that is overwhelmingly bound by law and not by grace. Sadly for many that law is followed without thought or question. More worrying still is that the law is followed out of fear of punishment or perhaps worst of all out of disinterest and despair.

We seem to be a spiritless society only living up to the expectations that are imposed by authority. Would we know how to behave with one another without the rules? Sometimes I wonder. I'm not advocating flaunting or avoiding either the commandments or our modern secular laws, but we are called to think about the underlying principles – the values and doctrine that gives them shape. We are called not to be limited in our thinking; we are called to so much more than just the law would allow. We are called to grace.

Paul tells us that *if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit... and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.* What he hopes we will understand is that we do not have the power in ourselves to overcome our tendency toward self-interest and sinfulness. If we are not to live a life based on desires of the flesh we can only do so when we are led by the Spirit.

For Paul, being led by the Spirit means that we are not under the law – we are not dictated to or held to some legal tyranny. We are free to receive the power to cope with the desires of the flesh. By the Spirit we are able to see plainly those things that make it impossible for us to get along with one another in a way that pleases God – not because of a rule that prohibits but because of God's action in the Spirit that guides and informs.

The Grade 10 student I mentioned earlier challenged prevailing wisdom – so did the Apostle Paul. Every time Paul spoke of God's grace and the freedom we have from the religious struggle to obtain God's favor, voices were raised in violent objection saying that he was destroying the law of God. People reacted fearfully to their misunderstanding that Paul advocated a “do whatever you like” mentality which couldn't have been further from his way of thinking. Paul saw that in Christ we are set free for a life that is not limited to the policies and regulations that we use to bind our behaviour and the behaviour of others.

No matter what edicts we pass, no matter what conventions are in place, if the focus of our living is on worldly measures of success, self-interest, and personal gain we are doomed. Material things are not evil, nor are human feelings, physical desires or sensual pleasures in themselves to be avoided or suppressed. What makes the flesh so destructive is that it can become the norm by which we live – it becomes our focus and we can only impose control in the form of legal sanctions and moral inhibitions. Living to the letter of the law is not what God desires for us.

Paul shows us a still more excellent way – the way of the Spirit – the way of God's grace – the way of Christ. In this way there is openness to God's activity – to the presence of the Holy Spirit. In this way fruit can be borne – not by human ability but by God's redemptive and transformative power.

Paul questions a society enslaved to the law – imprisoned by “do this – don't do that” and “for heavens sake don't get caught!” Paul understands the work of Christ as liberating. Through faith in Christ we are able to move to a more mature relationship with God than was previously possible. We were like dependent children under instruction and subject to a controlling discipline but he reminds us that we have been set free – not to indulge ourselves, but to live in the Spirit. As we embrace the love of Christ, we are given the ability to love for Christ – to become everything God desires. Paul is frustrated with a society satisfied to live in lockdown – encouraging instead the freedom of grace made possible in Christ – a freedom of the Spirit which yields abundant life. **Amen.**