

The Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 19:16B, 19-21
<i>Response</i>	You are my inheritance, O Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	Galatians 5:1, 13-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Speak, Lord, your servant is listening; you have the words of everlasting life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 9:51-62

On the Thirteenth Sunday in ordinary time, the Church continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Galatians. And here it picks up in Galatians 5:1, 13-18, which is Paul's well known teaching on freedom in Christ and the difference between the spirit and the flesh. Let's look at what the church gives to us for today's reading. In chapter five, verse one, Paul says:

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

And then it skips down to verse 13

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

All right. There's so much going on here. First of all, just recall that the letter to the Galatians, it's one of it is his angriest letters because he is seriously upset about the fact that some people are leading the Galatians to believe that in order to be justified, or in order to be saved, they have to be circumcised. You can hear some of the passion and the strong language that Paul uses in this passage, it is very characteristic of the letter to the Galatians.

Second, within that context of Paul arguing against the idea that you have to be circumcised in order to be saved, in that context is where he's using this language or imagery of slavery to the law, as well as the yoke or the burden of the law. The whole point, the overall point of this passage, is he's calling the Galatians to freedom in Christ. And what he means by freedom is freedom from having to be circumcised in order to enter into the covenant. That's the basic point that he's trying to make in this passage. That if you are in Christ, you are free from the law. You do not need to be circumcised in order to be saved. That's the primary meaning within the whole context of the letter.

However, with that said, it's important to highlight a couple of points here about the implications of what he's saying. Because you can imagine right off the bat, that if Paul's saying, "Oh, that you are free from the law," some people are going to take that to mean, "Well, I'm free to do whatever I want." Now, some people might misinterpret that as freedom to sin. He's going to have to strike a balance here between emphasizing freedom from the law of circumcision, but also emphasizing at the same time that this doesn't mean license or freedom to sin.

The way he does that is, as you would expect with Paul, in a very Jewish way. He draws on the language of Jewish tradition, of Jewish scripture, in particular, the pharisaic tradition to shed some light on this mystery. Let's just walk through a couple of images here. First, notice at the beginning, he says:

do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Now, remember, a yoke is not the yellow thing inside of an egg. A yoke is the bar or the beam that would be worn on the shoulders of an ox or on a pair of oxen in order to pull a plow, in order to plow a field. The imagery of a yoke of slavery would mean a burden of servitude that's being put on someone's shoulders.

Now in context, Paul clearly means this image of a yoke of slavery to refer to the yoke of the law of circumcision. Now, some people might find that a little too strong, maybe even possibly offensive. How could Paul compare God's law or the law of circumcision, which is given by God in the Old Testament, to that kind of a burden. Isn't that a very negative image?

But what we have to remember is that he's actually not the only ancient Jew to use that image to describe the law. For example, in ancient rabbinic literature, the same imagery of a yoke is used to describe both the law of Moses as well as the keeping of the commandments in general. Let me give you a couple examples just to put Paul in his Jewish context.

In the Mishna, which is an ancient collection of rabbinic writings from around the second century AD, it uses the same language of yoke in this way:

R. Joshua b. Karha said: “Why does the section, ‘Hear, O Israel’ precede ‘And it shall come to pass if you shall hearken?’—so that a man may first take upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven and afterward take upon himself *the* yoke of the commandments.²

Now, without getting into the exact meaning of what the rabbi's saying there means in its overall context, the basic point for us is notice he uses the metaphor of the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of the commandments to describe the burden of following the law of God and keeping the commandments of God. And that's not unheard of because if you go back and you read through the Pentateuch in its entirety, you're going to find that there are a lot of commandments there and that it would be difficult to keep them all without ever breaking one. The imagery they use here is the image of a yoke, but also remember something important. Although the yoke was a burden, one of the reasons the yoke would be placed on the oxen is not just so that they can pull a plough, but so that the farmer can direct them to plow in straight lines. So the oxen aren't just wandering all over the place. The yoke is both a burden, but it's also a guide. So it's an apt metaphor for describing the commandments of the Old Testament.

² Mishnah, *Berakoth* 2:2 (trans. H. Danby).

And sure enough, if you look later on in rabbinic tradition, they'll explain why this is a yoke, why this is a burden by enumerating just how many commandments the law contains. In one rabbinic tradition, it identifies there being 613 laws altogether in the Pentateuch. And I'm quoting here:

Rabbi Simlai when preaching said: Six hundred and thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative precepts... and two hundred and forty-eight positive precepts...³

Notice, what the rabbi is saying here is if you're going to keep the law, then you have 613 commandments that you have to pay attention to, that you need to avoid violating. And you can imagine that would be a burden to keep them all straight and to make sure that you not violate any of them. That rabbinic tradition of talking about the 613 commandments of Moses as a yoke, although those texts are from later, we already see Paul in the first century being one of the earliest witnesses to that language, to that metaphor, that imagery of the yoke of the law.

Except Paul's using it in the context of telling the Galatians, "you don't have to keep the law of circumcision. That yoke has been broken, so to speak. You don't have to carry that burden. Therefore:

For freedom

meaning freedom from the law of circumcision

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

In other words, don't give into the teachers who are telling you that you have to take the yoke of all 613 commandments upon yourself in order to be justified. Unfortunately here, the lectionary, it cuts out a little bit of the context that would make this clearer, because that was verse one. But verse two, listen, Paul says:

³ Babyloniand Talmud, *Makkoth* 23b (tran. Isidore Epstein).

Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

If you read it, the whole thing in context, this would be real clear that the law in particular Paul is talking about is the law of circumcision. That's clear from verses 2-12. But if you skip down to verse 13, which is where the lectionary picks up, Paul here recognizes that some people might misunderstand what he's saying. He is very quick to qualify that freedom from the law of circumcision doesn't mean just freedom from every law in the Old Testament. It doesn't mean license to do evil. This is very important. He says:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

All right. This is very important. What Paul's saying here is, "Although I'm telling you're free from the law, I don't mean that you're free from every law in the Old Testament, especially the law of love." Just because you don't have to be circumcised, doesn't mean you don't have to love your neighbor as yourself. And here we see Paul, in a sense, summarizing the second tablet of the Decalogue, which was focused on love of neighbor. Honor your father and mother, do not kill, do not steal. Those are all laws about how to love your neighbor. He's saying they're all summed up in one law and that's love your neighbor as yourself. Now, again, some people, like critics of Paul might respond to that by saying, "Oh, well, that's very convenient." He's doing an in run around the mosaic law by coming up with this novel idea that the whole law is summed up in love of neighbor. And that if you just love your neighbor, you're actually fulfilling the whole law. But that actually would be an unfair criticism, because Paul's not the only Jew to make this argument that the whole law is summed up in the love of neighbor.

For one thing, Jesus already made it in the gospels. You're familiar with that. When the scribe comes up to him and says, "What's the greatest law of them all." And Jesus says, "The greatest is this. Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." That'd be tablet one, love of God, the Ten Commandments. And then love your neighbor as yourself. It's a summary of tablet two.

But it wasn't just Jesus who said that the whole law could be summed up in that way. There was another rabbi in the first entry, actually two rabbis, Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel who, according to rabbinic tradition, had a similar statement about the summary of the law. And so, in the Talmud, in tractate Shabbat of paragraph 31a, listen to this story of rabbis who were rough contemporaries of Jesus, also making similar statements about how to sum up the whole law.

Quote:

It happened that a certain heathen [meaning a pagan] came before [Rabbi] Shammai and said to him, “Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me *the whole Torah* while I stand on one foot”.⁴

This is his challenge. Can you teach me the whole law while I stand here on one foot? I don't have much time because you can't stand on one foot very long. Teach me the whole law.

Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand.

I mean, I think it means he beat him off.

When he went before [Rabbi] Hillel,

who's the other famous rabbi at the time.

he said to him,

this is Rabbi Hillel speaking.

“*What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it.*”

What did Rabbi Hillel just say? Basically, he says the negative version of the golden rule, what is hateful to you, don't do to someone else, that sums up the

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbath* 31a (trans. Isidore Epstein).

whole law. Everything else is commentary. Paul's saying something similar here. Love your neighbor as yourself. That's the whole law. Everything else is commentary. So it's giving a primacy to the law of charity in the Old Testament, which makes sense again, because if you look at the Decalogue, at the end of the day, the Decalogue is about love of God and love of neighbor. That's the essence of the Ten Commandments. So Paul's not out of bounds here by saying that loving your neighbor as yourself summed up the whole law. In fact, he reflects, in some sense he's the first witness to a tradition that we'll see in the later collections of the sayings of the rabbis about the whole law being able to be summed up in the love of one's neighbor.

So, in context, when Paul says, "You've been called to freedom," he does not mean freedom to sin, he means freedom to love. And with that in mind, then in closing, he wants to encourage the Galatians. He closes by encouraging the Galatians to walk by the spirit and not to gratify the desires of the flesh because the desires of the flesh are against the spirit. Now, I've covered this in other videos, but I'll just say it briefly again here. When Paul talks about the flesh and the spirit, he doesn't mean the body and the soul, as we tend to think of it, these two parts of one human being. He's talking about two realms, two spheres of reality. The flesh has to do with this fallen world, this sinful world. And then the spirit is the agent of the new world, the world to come, the new creation.

And what he's describing here is, and he'll say this, if you keep reading Galatians, you'll go on to see that by the flesh he's referring in particular to sin, to the realm of sin. Because he'll go on to describe the works of the flesh as sexual immorality, impurity, idolatry, sorcery, jealousy, anger, all of these sins. When he says, "Don't walk according to the works of the flesh," he's saying don't sin. And then when he encourages them to walk according to the spirit, again just a few verses later in Galatians, he'll talk about the fruit of the spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. He's commanding them to walk and lead lives of virtue. So he's not pitting some kind of dichotomy between body and soul. He's talking about the difference between a life of sin and a life of virtue. What he's telling them is, although you don't have to be circumcised to be saved, it doesn't mean that you don't have to follow the law of love or that you can sin. No, you have to avoid the works of the flesh and live according to the fruits of the spirit. That's his message to the Galatians. And it's so powerful that Paul does this because he's just so insightful. Obviously, he's inspired by the Holy Spirit. That

always helps. But it's so insightful because one of the things we're going to see in the history of the church is a kind of tendency to either swing toward the extreme of a legalism, which would be an over focus or over emphasis on the carrying out of external works in order to be saved.

You'll see this in Pelagianism, for example. But also, there's the tendency toward libertinism or license, where people will say, "It doesn't matter what I do. Nothing I can do can make me lose my salvation." And Paul doesn't want either of those to be the case. He wants people to recognize that they truly are free from the law of Moses, but they're not free to sin. They're free to love and they're free to grow in virtue. That's what the freedom for Christ has taken place. And that all laws in the Old Testament are not created equal. Some laws are going to pass away, like the law of circumcision. It's not there from the beginning with Adam. And it won't be there later. Or the food laws. Noah is not under the food laws in the book of Genesis, but Moses is going to institute them later. Those laws are temporary. They have a certain function, but they're going to pass away once the new covenant comes around. Other laws, like the laws against blasphemy, or idolatry, or adultery, the Ten Commandments, the laws focused on love of God and love of neighbor. Those never pass away. They never pass away. That's why, when Jesus is asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" What does he say? "Keep the commandments." And he's not talking about the commandment of circumcision there. He's talking about the Decalogue. He's talking about the Ten Commandments, and that's what Paul is talking about as well.

In closing, just a little insight from the living tradition, it's precisely these words of Paul that would later on lead the saints and Doctors of the Church to emphasize that the most important commandment, or the most important law that we can keep is the law of love, is the law of charity. Listen to St. Thomas Aquinas's comments on this passage. He says this:

Thomas Aquinas: [C]harity must be maintained,

It's not optional in other words.

because the whole law is fulfilled in one word, namely, in the one precept of charity: "he that loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8) and

love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10)... [*For*] *in the love of God is included love of neighbor... Conversely, we love our neighbor for the love of God.* Consequently, the whole law is fulfilled in the one precept of charity.⁵

What Aquinas does is he explains why Paul can say this. And what he says is, when we love God rightly, one effect of that, one result of that is that we're going to love our neighbor rightly because our neighbor is made in the image and likeness of God. And conversely, when we love our neighbor rightly, who is made in image and likeness of God, we're going to love God as well. And that's why Paul can say that charity is the one thing necessary. It's the one precept that we have to fulfill because love of God and love of neighbor, in a sense, are unfolded in one another. And by exercising them, by loving God and loving our neighbor, we actually fulfill not just part of the law, but the law in its entirety.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Galatians*, no. 304.