

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.(Galatians 6:1)

Pity the one who desires forgiveness in this world, but does not receive it. The old man trudges on. He wronged someone long ago. Perhaps he wronged his beloved. He swore that he would never do any such thing, yet he did, and now he walks with his grey head bowed. The years have passed. He does not have many left err he is off to meet his Maker. It would mean a lot to him if he could hear those sweet words, “I forgive you.” Yet it is not looking likely. The one from whom he would love to hear those words is not willing to restore him with a spirit of gentleness.

Or imagine one in the full vigor and strength of life — only what good is strength if you are burdened by guilt? Samson with all his might could not lift this burden. Only the one she has offended... only the one he has offended can truly lift this weight. Life goes on, yes. There are bills to be paid and duties to be performed, but, oh! how good it would be to have a heart unfettered by guilt! How good it would be if only the one betrayed would restore the betrayer with a spirit of gentleness.

Or pity the child from whom forgiveness is withheld. Mother and father — the very ones who constitute safety and meaning in this world: they seem so angry that the child feels that he has lost their love. The child does not dispute that he did wrong. He just doesn't know how to set things right again. How he longs to be restored, to hold his head up high again, to have hope as he goes out in this world. How he wishes mother and father would restore him with a spirit of gentleness.

In this morning's text, St. Paul urges Christians to be more gentle in dealing with one another. Be less severe. Count that soul before

you as precious — even that one who has let you down or let Christ down.

It is an easy case, perhaps. We are not speaking of the unrepentant sinner. We are not speaking of that hard heart who could care less whether you forgive him or not. We are not speaking of the duties of the magistrate who must judge crime according to the law. Rather, we are speaking of that one who has been overcome in sin, but would be glad to be restored. His sin might have been despicable, the wrong she did very deep, yet the sinner is repentant and would be glad to hear you say, I forgive you.

An easy case, perhaps, but for that reason, we must try to get this right. If ever a pastor had a keen intellect and high moral standards before which many of us would fall short, that pastor would be St. Paul. Yet it is he who urges peace within the Christian congregation and goodwill one toward another:

¹My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.

That we might enjoy this preaching of St. Paul even more, let me try to briefly place this morning's Epistle reading within the context of Paul's whole letter to the Galatians, and then let us linger some with the logic of our particular reading. I think we will find that Christian freedom has a definite structure and contours and walks in certain paths — including the path of seeking to restore those who have been overcome by sin.

First, a word about the wider context for this morning's reading. St. Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* is but six chapters long, but they are very rich chapters. In the American edition of

Luther's Works, Luther has two full volumes of commentary on *Galatians*, each volume being over four hundred pages long. Luther cherished this epistle as a chief document of Christian freedom.

The drama of Paul's letter to the Galatians is that there are other Christian missionaries who have come along and have argued that Paul is insane: that he has seriously misunderstood the Gospel, and that he has led the poor Galatians astray. Paul does not like this charge.

Paul's opponents seem to be Jewish Christian missionaries, as Paul is himself, except that these Jewish Christian missionaries remain committed to circumcision. They believe that one cannot be part of God's people unless one accepts the traditional identifying marks of that people, including circumcision and certain dietary disciplines. They were alarmed that Paul was preaching a new way of being part of the Church — the way of freedom from the traditional laws of Israel.

Now, we are approaching a subtle point, but a very important point. The distinction between Paul's preaching and that of his opponents is best put in terms of what it is in which a Christian may truly boast. We have already heard Paul's stance a few weeks ago, earlier in this summer's reading of *Galatians*. Paul means to boast only of Christ. He means to put his faith, his life, and his eternal salvation in the hands, not of himself, nor his circumcision, nor his obedience to God's holy laws, nor *anything* about himself, but simply to entrust himself to Jesus. It must be that way, Paul argues, else Jesus has died in vain. His great argument can be found in Galatians Chapter Two:

I have been crucified with Christ;
²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Now, here is the rub. Here is the point of controversy. When Paul's opponents heard him say things like this — like this very verse I just quoted:

²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes *through the law*, then Christ died for nothing.

— they feared that Paul was setting aside the holy law of God. And they feared this correctly if they meant God's law as a *way of justification*. For Paul does indeed preach freedom from God's law as a way of justification.

But Paul does not mean to set aside God's holy law as the way in which a Christian should live and walk that he or she might be living a life pleasing to the Triune God. Paul does not reject God's law, only a false opinion concerning that law — that is, the false opinion that we can earn our salvation by way of obedience to that law.

But as for the proper life of a Christian, it is very much matter of law. Indeed, in this morning's passage we find that Paul says that our life is a matter of what he calls the "law of Christ."

Now, I believe we are more ready to turn to the logic of this morning's particular Epistle reading.

At first glance, the argument of this morning's reading is along the lines of the saying of our Lord:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. ²For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged : and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. (Matthew 7:1-2, KJV)

That is, St. Paul seems to be urging the Galatians to restore the sinner with a spirit of gentleness because that is the principle by which we ourselves hope to be judged someday:

⁷Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. (Gal. 6:7)

On the final day of reckoning, when we must stand before the Triune God and give an account of how we have lived our lives, we do well to hope for mercy, for "all we like sheep have gone astray." (Isaiah 53:6) And so, if we must each hope for mercy on Judgment Day, we should

grant such mercy to the fallen sinner in our midst.

And I think that that is all true. In the end, we each must give an account of our lives to God, we have all sinned, we all need mercy, and we should practice such mercy with one another meanwhile.

But I believe that there is something more going on in Paul's argument — something more, something higher, something more wonderful. It concerns Jesus.

Suppose we take seriously what Paul has earlier said about the believer's unity with Christ:

I have been crucified with Christ;
²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. (Galatians 2)

If this is so, then Paul's compulsion to gently restore the sinner is not based simply on his own hope for mercy someday, but on the more profound point that it is no longer he who lives, but Christ in him, and it is the character of Christ to forgive the sinner.

It is inevitable, then, that Paul would give the pastoral advice that we should seek to restore the sinner and to do so with a spirit of gentleness. For did not Jesus do the same with the women caught in adultery?

¹⁰When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? ¹¹She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. John 8:10-11, KJV)

And did not Jesus do so on the Cross, with his dying breath?

³⁴Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34, KJV)

That one who has let you down — that old one who walks with his grey head bent down, or the strong one who is fettered by a guilty heart, or the child whose world is reeling because mother or father know longer seems to love, or the one who has brought scandal upon the Church, but is sorry and means to do better — such guilty ones are meant to trod the path of

repentance. And you can help them along. Or you can hinder them.

The apostolic exhortation is to “restore” the one overcome by sin. The goal is restoration, not rejection, not casting off toward hell, not consignment away from us. And the restoration is to be done “with a spirit of gentleness” — not haughtiness, nor contempt, nor capitulation to the sinner, but restoration of the sinner to the path of holiness of life.

Sometimes it is a very hard path to walk, this matter of restoring the sinner. But the ideal takes expression for us in the Bible, including this final appeal with which I close. Again, the pastoral appeal comes from St. Paul:

Ephesians 4:29-5:1

²⁹Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

³⁰And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.

³¹Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:

³²And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

And to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.