

Life: Stick with service

May 1, 2015

• *The Bible Studies for Life* lesson for May 17 focuses on Galatians 5:13-15; 6:1-5, 10.

In high school, I had a friend who tried to justify lying to her parents by saying, “God will forgive me.” Her rationale was if lying was the most expedient solution to getting herself out of a jam, she would rather “ask for forgiveness rather than permission” (the adult version of this attitude).

My friend abused not only her parents’ trust, but also the freedom Christ offers his followers when she intentionally chose to sin, relying on God to grant her forgiveness later. The freedom Paul speaks of in his letter to the Galatians is, after all, a freedom from sin, not freedom to sin: “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh” (Galatians 5:13). The freedom from sin Christ offers releases his followers to serve their neighbors with humility and love, thus fulfilling God’s command (v. 14).

Slave or free?

Paul explains freedom from sin by contrasting it with the yoke of slavery: “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (5:1). He warns the Galatians not to turn back to the “weak and miserable forces” of the world by attempting to live a life independent of the grace of God (4:9). Ironically, when we turn from God’s grace to live our lives according to our own rules and desires, we enslave ourselves rather than gain the freedom we seek.

Paul further describes freedom from sin by examining the purposes of the old and new covenants God made with his people. The law of the old covenant makes us “conscious of our sin” (Romans 3:19) and our slavery to its power. No human, because we inherit the sin nature of Adam, can keep

it perfectly. However, Jesus, the “last Adam,” fulfilled the old covenant by living a sin-free life, dying as our sacrificial lamb, and living again as our resurrected Lord (1 Corinthians 15:45; 2 Corinthians 3:14).

By doing so, he gave us a new covenant—a new way of living by grace. We are free from our sin nature, and we are empowered by the Spirit to live out that freedom by choosing God’s ways instead of our own. Therefore, instead of being enslaved to the “flesh,” living narcissistic lives, Christians are empowered to freely “serve one another humbly in love” (Galatians 5:13).

How do we serve each other?

The way to be a servant is simple in concept but harder to practice: “Love your neighbor as yourself”(v. 14). My husband is one of the best examples of a servant I know. He is the director of our association’s camp, and he truly receives joy from extending hospitality to the hundreds of guests who visit the camp each week. At home, he happily shops for groceries, takes out the trash, walks the dog and even cooks Sunday dinners as if it’s his privilege to do so. He has earned the respect of my two sons (we are a blended family) by prioritizing their needs and treating them consistently with kindness and fairness. To me, my husband exemplifies Paul’s admonition to “serve one another humbly in love” and “resist the temptation to bite and devour each other,” which only results in mutual harm (vv. 13, 15).

It may be difficult to love our neighbors—and friends, family, co-workers or strangers—and serve them humbly if they treat us unfairly, selfishly or with anger. In Matthew 5:46, Jesus reminds us anyone can “love those who love you.” Even tax collectors do that! One of the defining marks of a follower of Christ is we treat others with love even when they do not deserve it. In doing so, we exemplify the unearned grace Christ extends to us.

Furthermore, when someone needs correction, we must do so gently. If we admonish someone with an attitude of superiority or smugness, we deceive ourselves by thinking we are not tempted to sin in the same kinds of ways. Jesus had harsh words for those who compare themselves to others and conclude, "I am better than she is, because I don't sin that way" (Luke 18:9-14). We each are accountable to God for our own sinful thoughts and actions.

Reaping the rewards

Paul assures us whatever we do that "pleases the Spirit" brings an eternal reward. Even though we might tire of serving others without thanks or treating people who have wronged us with gentleness, we are not to give up, "for at the proper time we will reap a harvest" (6:9). In almost every situation, we have a choice regarding how we treat others. Will we give or take? Will we react in anger or gentleness? The Spirit of Christ urges us to choose the better way of demonstrating our freedom in Christ through lovingly serving others.