

Passing A True/False Test

by Steve Zeisler

Our service of worship this morning will center around the Lord's table. I would like to read to you some hard words of Jesus regarding this event:

He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me shall live because of Me. This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate, and died, he who eats this bread shall live forever. (John 6:54-58)

Jesus said that what we have represented before us this morning, recalling the sacrifice of the Lord for us, is "true food." Food is a subject of interest for everyone. We all think of food every day. For many of us, food is a lifelong hobby. But here Jesus declares that there is a kind of food, a kind of sustenance which grants us eternal life, an eternal quality of life, a building of character that will last forever. That food is Jesus himself given up for us. It is not like ordinary food. The manna which the people of Israel ate over the course of 40 years did not give them that kind of a life; all who partook of it subsequently died. But here Jesus is referring to the kind of food that sustains us, forever. It is "true food," he declares.

In verse 12 of chapter 4 of the book of Galatians the apostle Paul raises the same issue, essentially. There he says that there is truth that we ought to apprehend and choose. There is also a shadow of the truth, an inadequate alternative to the truth. There is true food, which is genuine, eternal, lasting spiritual truth; and there is an alternative to that. As we see these alternatives laid before us we are responsible to make choices, to believe what is true and to act on the things we believe.

In verses 12 through 20 Paul writes of choosing between true and false in regard to Christian fellowship; what it means to be "eagerly sought after." ("to be made much of" or to be "zealously courted"). Speaking of Christian fellowship, Paul says it is appropriate that when we meet as Christians there should be an enthusiasm for one another evident among us. We ought to make much of one another, long for one another and look forward to being together. If our Christian life, especially as a church, does not have that quality about it then we are in need of great change.

But there is a right and a wrong kind of eagerness. In this section Paul will identify the right kind as his love relationship with these Galatians; while he indicts the Judaizers as those who exhibit a wrong kind of eager concern.

Galatians 4:12:

I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong; but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God as Jesus Christ Himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness, that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth? They eagerly seek you, not commendably. They wish to shut you out in order that you may seek them. It is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you, but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

We will begin with the first phrase in that section because it says something about mutuality in Christian fellowship. Paul says, "Become as I am, for I also have become as you are." He recognized that from the beginning to be "in Christ" meant that Christians shared a mutual relationship with each other, a relationship that was built on equality and on respect. The Christian church is probably the only human institution in the world that has as its charter instant equality among members. The newest baby in Christ deserves to be treated with respect, to be involved in the center of Christian living, to be cared for, just as much as the most mature Christian around. While other organizations have formal or informal initiation rites- newcomers are referred to as rookies, plebes, novices who have to earn the respect of those who are further along- that ought not be true among Christians. Christians belong to each other. Though responsibilities and gifts may vary, respect for one another, involvement with and concern for one another ought not vary. "Become as I am for I also have become as you are," Paul writes. "I'm offering myself to you. I'm asking you to enter into my life because I'm willing and open to enter into yours."

Evidently at one point Paul had come to Galatia, and because of some illness which he had, he stayed there. This is a bit of early church history that we do not have a precise fix on. There are various guesses as to what form his illness took. It was evidently distasteful in some sense, as he expected people to be turned off by his appearance when he was ill. Some have guessed that he had an eye disease which made his face repulsive. Others have guessed that he suffered from malaria. When he came into the cities of Galatia bringing the gift of the gospel, however, the Galatians received him as an angel of God. They offered gifts of mercy to him, caring for him in his illness. Thus from the beginning the apostle and his people each had something to give to each other. They ministered to each other. They began their relationship in a love affair of respect and mutual giving and concern Christian relationships that are really nourishing (as Jesus' sacrifice for us is "true food") will be characterized by this same two-- way quality today.

Paul asks some penetrating questions in this section. As he thinks about the quality of the relationship he had with these people, he asks, "What has happened to your sense of blessing? Where has the joy gone? Why is your Christian fellowship no longer characterized by a rippling and aggressive kind of joy?" Let's be sure we hear what he is saying here. The joy that they experienced together was of such quality that it allowed these Galatians to overcome repulsion at Paul's physical appearance. So great was their joy they were willing to sacrifice their eyes -- their most precious bodily possession. They were not concerned about self-- preservation. The apostle asks, "What has happened to that joy? Why is your Christian fellowship not filled with that kind of reality and excitement anymore?"

Paul asks another hard question: "Have I become your enemy by telling the truth?" That is a very penetrating question. "Is the Christian fellowship you experience now one in which truth is looked down on? Are flattery, politeness and phony smiles the order of the day? Has truth, a willingness to enter into what is really happening in people's lives, to face them at times with things they do not want to hear and live with them through the consequences, has that disappeared from your experience? 'Am I now your enemy because I tell the truth?' " Politeness that hides the truth is not a gift of the Spirit. A commitment to speak the truth is.

Paul now contrasts what he remembers of his time with them and what they subsequently experienced with the group he identifies in verse 17. "These ones," he says, "eagerly seek you as well. They are concerned and enthusiastic for you. They are eagerly seeking you also, but they are doing so for the wrong reasons. It is very important to see the difference between what they offer and what the Lord intends for us." He charges that the Judaizers have a price tag attached to their enthusiasm. "They are eager for you, but they desire to shut you out so that you will seek them," he says. "They want to own you. They want to make you dependent on them, to enslave you. They will be eager for your company. They will flatter you and be concerned for you and seek you out, but there is a price to pay. The day will come when you will wake up and realize that they have extracted that price." That is a terrible parody of real Christian fellowship.

Friends of mine had their first baby recently. They received many letters of congratulation, expressions of joy and delight over their baby, from their families and friends. Those letters were motivated by love. This young couple also received letters rejoicing with them over the birth of the baby from diaper service people and from manufacturers of baby food. But that joy was a different kind of joy, as these commercial letters had something else in mind. They contained coupons for strained carrots, baby photos, powder, shampoo and the like. There was a price to be extracted, in other words. Though happiness and interest were expressed, there

was no love, no commitment manifest in them. These letters were part of a calculated effort to benefit financially from the birth of this baby.

At the end of this letter Paul reminds the Galatians that the Judaizers wanted to see them circumcised so they could boast in their flesh. They wanted, in a sense, to take trophies back with them to Jerusalem so that they would be seen to be rich, to show they had gained a kind of standing in another place by winning these Galatians to their cause.

One approach could not be more different than the other. That is the point the apostle is making. In Christ we ought to love each other. Our fellowship ought to be filled with such truth, joy, commitment and honesty that we are willing to give up our lives for one another, to give up our eyes for one another, to overlook things about one another that repel other people. And we ought to do so because we are committed to a kind of giving where everybody gives and everybody receives, rather than have eagerness in fellowship built on a price tag.

You can pay for anything. Any kind of companionship, any kind of human interaction can be bought on the market. You can pay for people to travel with you, to laugh at your jokes, to converse with you, to take care of your home, to host your parties. You can pay for people to sleep in your bed with you; you can pay for people to mourn at your funeral. Any kind of human relationship can be bought for a price. But Christians are members of a family who love each other, a family in which everybody gives and everybody receives, where the home is a center for giving, for caring, where people who are interested in your life are interested because they love you. What a contrast! "Where's the joy?" Paul asks. "Why have you bought this terrible imitation meal when true food, in terms of Christian relationships, the real thing, is available to you? This is the food that sustains real life. Why have you accepted a meal that can't provide any nourishment at all in place of one that is really nourishing?"

Beginning with verse 21, Paul deals with another subject, but he is going to drive home the same point. Here he reviews both history and certain themes of Scripture and he says that a thoughtful review of these things will bring us to the same conclusion.

Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?

"Don't you hear the law?" he asks. I believe he is referring, in his use of the word "law" here (especially the second time in that verse), to the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Those books are called "the law," but they consist mainly of history, not codes of rules. What Paul is saying is, "Haven't you listened? Haven't you tuned your ear to hear what's going on?" Jesus told those who followed him, "Those who have ears should hear." A symphony may have as its theme a very simple melody. At times that melody may be played in crashing, loud tones, at other times softly; sometimes the theme is played quickly, sometimes slowly, but there is a simple melody running through the symphony that holds it together. "Can you hear the theme?" is Paul's question. "Can you apprehend the simple reality that is witnessed to in Old Testament history?"

There are two streams of humanity. That will be the simple message. Despite all the diversity, all the apparent differences in culture, in language, in interests, despite all the ways human beings divide themselves up, in the long run all of us are headed into one of two camps. Finally there are only two kinds of human beings.

Listen to what Paul says:

It is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bond woman and one by the free woman. The son by the bond woman was born according to the flesh. The son by the free woman through the promise. This contains an allegory. These women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband." And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to

the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman." So then, brethren, we are not children of a slave woman, but of the free woman. It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery.

In "The Chronicles of Narnia," by C. S. Lewis, one of the stories, "The Silver Chair," is about two children and a Marshwiggle who travel to the land of the giants. At one point in their journey they are walking on a hillside that is covered in little trenches that seem to lead nowhere. The children cannot figure out the point of these trenches. Later, however, they discover that an important message was written in the hillside. If they had stood back far enough they could have read that the trenches formed letters which were cut into the hillside, letters conveying an important message. Paul is saying that there is a theme in Scripture, an important message, which, if we would back up far enough, we would recognize as a theme that runs all through the Bible. A supremely important announcement is being made, all the details taken together point to it. That announcement is that human history is headed to a division of humanity into two camps: two sons, two wives, two covenants, two mountains, two cities. That is the haunting melody of Scripture. Slavery or freedom? Those are the two options. One of them is "true food," one of them is genuinely satisfying, while the other leads to misery.

In verse 23 we are told that these two kinds of humanity have different origins. The son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh; the son by the free woman through the promise. Slavery is the lot of men and women who reject God and determine to do their very best to be as wise, as strong and as courageous as they can be, to do their very best to make life work without God. But the very best, the strong right arm of the flesh raised up produces nothing but slavery. In a time of weakness, Sarah and Abraham stopped believing that God would keep his promise and determined in an intelligent and thoughtful way to have a son so that Abraham could bring about the good God had promised. Abraham embraced his slave woman Hagar and had a son by her. It was a thoughtful choice, a sacrificial choice on Sarah's part, but it led to slavery. Hagar was a slave. Her son was not the son who would inherit the promise of life. The two humanities come from a different origin: one originates from the commitment of God, made from his heart to do good to us, in which we believe what he said and we have life as a result; the other is a determination on our part to make things work, and that leads to slavery.

Paul says in verse 29 that the two humanities are inevitably in conflict with each other: 'At that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.' Ishmael, the son born to Hagar, tormented little Isaac after God kept his word and gave Sarah a son. Hagar, the slave woman, tormented Sarah the wife, ridiculing her during the time when she had a child and Sarah did not. Paul sees in that a truth that spreads everywhere: inevitably the flesh and the Spirit are antagonists. Inevitably human flesh is jealous of the power of the Spirit of God and will resist it. The two cannot be mixed together. There is no way to pick the best from both camps. A great chasm stands between them, and they will always be at odds with each other.

Lastly, Paul makes the point in verses 30 and 31 and in verse 1 of chapter 5 that we are called on to make a choice: 'Cast out the slave woman and her son . . . it was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.' We are told to reject what is not 'food,' to reject the fleshly options (however attractive) that are before us. These are not meals that will sustain us. We are to reject that which leads to slavery; we are to embrace real freedom, true Christianity, a faith that brings life and worth to us. We are to reject the one and to choose the other.

Let us remember the words of Jesus as we come now to the communion table:

He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me shall also live because of Me. This is the bread which came down out of Heaven; not as the fathers ate, and died, he who eats this bread shall live forever.

There is a meal, there is a source of supply for us that will build lives that last forever.

We have before us a symbol of the reality of the sacrifice of Christ. In a moment we will take a tiny piece of bread to eat and a very small cup of liquid to drink. If we needed physical sustenance, those elements would not serve us for very long. They will, however, point to a source that offering. will sustain us. There is real food for our spirits, food that will make us men and women who will glorify God forever. Jesus said that his sacrifice was real supply for us.

Paul urges the same kind of choice. Will we experience real nourishment in our relationship with each other, one that is filled with joy and committed to honesty? Will we understand that, despite all the confusion the world has to offer in terms of answers, all of us are headed to either slavery or freedom, and that we need to choose freedom and refuse to be subject again to the yoke of slavery? These issues are part of the real food which Jesus is

Dear Lord, we sense that this is an important moment in our lives. We are challenged by your words to search ourselves. How easily we are swayed. We ask that as we come to your table now that you will open our minds where we have been confused or foolish, and that you will help us set those things aside. Help us to sustain ourselves with a meal that is real food indeed. Help us to be more concerned for you and your sacrifice and your life than for anything else. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Catalog No. 3927
Galatians 4:12-5:1
Eleventh message
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June 24, 1984

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