

First Fifteen: January 10-14
Focus Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Monday: Galatians 5:13-15

Going Deeper: As we have begun a new year, these words written by the Apostle Paul are timeless. They ring out clearly, cutting through the polarization that we have been experiencing. Paul lifts the curtain of what true freedom means for us as followers of Jesus. Freedom in Christ is not about what I want, or what I deserve, or even what I need... Eugene Peterson has captured what freedom in Christ means in his rendering of Galatians 5:13b... *“use your freedom to serve one another in love, that’s how freedom grows.”* (The Message) These words from Paul tell us what I am sure we already know and may have learned through experience... Persistent conflict without reconciliation never allows for healing, eroding hope and any true sense of being free. Where do you want to experience a deeper sense or freedom this year? Both Paul and Jesus tell us the foundations of freedom come from within, they begin with our own awareness and sense of being free through God’s love for us allowing us to live our lives without the need to prove ourselves. This freedom creates community and helps us form relationships that seek mutual benefit for all.

Prayer: Loving God, our source of life, love, and hope... lead me into a deeper understanding of your love for me which is given not as something I must earn or prove myself as worthy. You simply love me because I am your child. Help me embrace this truth and allow it to become a foundation for freedom within me that flows out into the lives of others around me. Lead me to where I need a greater awareness of your grace so I may know a greater sense of freedom. Amen.

Tuesday: Galatians 5:16-18

Going Deeper: What I hear in these words is Paul’s attempt to describe the tug of war I suspect we have all known or experienced. I feel it most often when I see someone in need... do I stop and try to find out what this person needs, or do I just keep going. We feel the pull of the Spirit to engage, but we also know to choose to help could become messy and it may require more than I want to give, or feel I have the time to do so. This internal wrestling is what I suspect Paul is describing, and he identifies the push pull within us as the movement of the Holy Spirit and our own self-centered desires which are at times at odds with the freedom discovered through God’s mercy, grace, and acceptance. I want to say, it is OK to walk away, we do not need to respond to every need, although I want to encourage you to become more aware and present in these moments and simply recognize them inviting God’s leading to help you become clearer in how to respond in each of them.

Prayer: Infinite mercy is given to us, You are a well that never runs dry Lord... help me trust your leadings, the gentle nudge, the quiet whisper that rises throughout my day. Give me a deepening trust that you have given me all I need allowing me to share and respond from a place of grace, love, and mercy as you bring these opportunities to me today. Amen.

Wednesday: Galatians 5:19-21

Going Deeper: Wow! Paul creates quite a list of negative relationship destroying choices when we act out from a place of selfishness. If you are reading the NIV translation Paul's words may be a bit confusing. The NIV translates the Greek word used by Paul as our "sinful nature." The word used by Paul is most directly translation as "flesh," and its original context referred to a self-focused or self-serving nature. If you have the Message, I encourage you to read these verses from that translation as well. I suspect it will be helpful. These are not words of condemnation from Paul, simply a warning... if we choose to live outside the freedom created by God's grace, experienced as we embrace God's love, we will miss the kingdom as it begins to take root and bloom in our lives. The freedom created by living a life guided by Jesus' teachings of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves helps us discover peace and create community instead of these alternatives based upon selfish desire which often disrupt community, and clearly do not foster peace. What can you do today to build community and help create peace for others and yourself?

Prayer: Loving God, divine source of all we know as life giving... help me see where your love has already created far more abundance than I can provide for myself. Open my eyes to where and how you have provided hope, peace and joy for me and my family. Give me a greater awareness of the community you provide for us and how being more kind, more loving, and more understanding actually leads me to greater freedom and a more abundant life. Amen.

Thursday: Galatians 5:22-26

Going Deeper: One of my favorite fruits are fresh navel oranges which ripen this time of year. Their flavor is more intense, and their aroma is more pungent when they are fresh, and I try to enjoy them whenever I can. The same can be said about our lives when you and I seek to live by the Spirit as Paul has been saying in this 5th chapter of Galatians. But what does this really mean? Again, I turn to the Message... *"Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives."* (Gal. 5:25 – The Message) These "Fruit of the Spirit... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" are something God desires us to both experience and share with others. I would love to tell you they just appear "magically" but just like so many other things in our lives we must be intentional about their cultivation. We do this by being attentive to how we react and respond to others, not allowing ourselves to be controlled by what Paul calls our selfish or self-centered desires, and instead by allowing ourselves to be guided by Jesus' call to *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* This practice of intentional living creates the cultivated soil from which the "Fruits of the Spirit" will begin to take root.

Prayer: Lord of the harvest, gather in all that distracts me and seeks to steal my focus and attention from who I am and what I say I believe. Help me use your call to love to guide and sharpen my focus as I engage others. Help me to live with intention learning the practice of my

faith, moving my ideas and sentiment into actions. Be with me as I stumble or stray and help me know your mercy is both tender and strong. Amen.

Friday: Galatians 6:7-10

Going Deeper: Paul's words here again tell us something we already know, there are always consequences for our choices and actions. If we treat people unfairly throughout our lives, there is a good chance we will die alone. Ouch! That may sound overstated, but it was meant to clarify Paul's comments in Galatians 6:8... *"Those who plant only for their own benefit will harvest devastation from their selfishness, but those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life from the Spirit."* (CEB) Paul's intention as I understand it was not to determine who was going to make the grade for entrance into heaven. Paul is talking about life right here and right now. We can make choices that can create hell on earth for others as well as ourselves, or if we will allow the love of God to guide us through the nudges and tugs of the Spirit or in Paul's words by planting love, kindness and understanding we can create peace and the beginning of the kingdom of God right here right now. That is where eternal life begins, as we respond to the teachings of Jesus and the leading of the Holy Spirit throughout our day, each and every day.

Prayer: Loving God another week has come and gone, help me build upon each day in my desire to love you, myself, and my neighbor. Help me grow in the practice of my faith, and in doing so know I am helping you reveal your kingdom and sharing your invitation with others to join me. Eternal Love help me trust your grace as I stumble, as well as your faithfulness in trusting the seeds I plant will take root not only in my life, but in the lives of others. Amen.