

Galatians 5:13-15  
Do Not Bite One Another  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
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We're in a series called "One Another" in which we look at how we as the Church of Jesus Christ witness to the winsome and compelling love Jesus had for others. And what we see in these one another passages is the surprising freedom available when instead of stepping over one another, or pushing one another to the side, we serve, encourage, accept, and love one another. And today we come to a passage that offers a rather strange exhortation. On this Independence Day Weekend, "don't bite one another."

**For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup>But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.**

On this weekend, and in the days to come we will gather for picnics, fireworks, and patriotic concerts, in celebration this great nation in which we are privileged to live. I wish you a Happy Independence Day weekend. I always find it funny what gets paired with the July 4<sup>th</sup> Holiday. Celebrate freedom from no more taxation without representation with a 36-months interest free on a new car. Or commemorate the break from the tyranny of the crown by taking home that new bedroom set you've had your eye on all year. Or my personal favorite, pay tribute to this land that you love by taking fireworks into the backyard blowing up a small portion of it. Maybe that's why I paired this passage about not biting or consuming one another on the weekend of the 4<sup>th</sup>.

The question is fitting not only for our church but also for our nation: we are freed from all sorts of things, but for what purpose? (more importantly what are we free for?)

Paul in writing to the Galatians says: do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. But, in love, serve one another. Embrace your freedom, Paul says, but in a unique way—by becoming slaves to one another. You see as members of Greek society, they would have known well what it meant to be enslaved. Many of them would have been slaves themselves. But interestingly Paul turns the distinction of slave and free on its head. He says, look, the opposite of slavery is not unrestrained self-indulgence, but it is a sanctified view of servanthood or slavery. You are no longer enslaved to earthly masters or your own passions, but you have a new master, Jesus Christ and his will for your life. His will is that you would be so filled with abundance, peace, and joy in His Spirit that you are then free to share it in grateful service to one another.

This idea is one that was at the very heart of our Founding Fathers' vision for America as well. American Religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom reflects on our unique departure from other Republics throughout history. What made America unique was, among other things, the Puritan Christian influence in the development of our American mindset. Our framers took these concepts of life liberty and happiness down from the ethereal realm and gave them concrete application. Human rights were given clarity by the persistent Gospel-centered emphasis on covenant and responsibility. You are free to pursue these gifts not at the expense of one another, but together with and for the good of one another.

Or in the words of the Old Testament Abrahamic Covenant itself: you are blessed to be a blessing.

Freedom, Paul says, is the deep and abiding trust that God is our provider and that every good gift we have is not because of how great we are, but how infinitely merciful and loving God is. We are free from the fear that God's generosity is a zero-sum game? It is precisely because we have been so amazingly blessed that we can give sacrificially and without fear of scarcity.

But do you know what happens when the anxiety of scarcity and fledgling faith gets the better of us? That sideways look, or the subtle insult spoken over coffee when so-and-so is not around, that prayer request that begins, "bless her heart" which is really just gossip cloaked in spirituality.

Here's where Paul's warning arises. **If you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.**

Now I know this is really a stretch, but I want you to imagine a church in which rumors were allowed to spread and where backbiting took place? Hard to imagine I know, but I want to suggest that this idea of biting and devouring one another is one of the most pervasive and destructive forces in communities like ours. We still use phrases like, don't bite my head off; or that was a biting remark. And this word devour can be more woodenly translated, annihilate one another. And if we are not careful, these ways of interacting with one another can be subtly and deliciously destructive.

Author John Ortberg talks about this strategy in our culture of ventilating our anger, and how in the 60s and 70s this became a popular way to handle our anger. Just blowing off steam, or just getting something off my chest. And conventional wisdom said if we don't do this it will build and build until it erupts like a volcano and a river of rage. Does this sound like a good idea?

Ortberg says: Why do we think that way about anger? We don't think that way about other emotions. No one says I've been holding in joy all these years; people tell funny jokes, and I just repress all my laughter; I haven't released it and it's been building up inside me. Now the joy dam is about to burst; I'm gonna spew joy all over everybody. Therapists don't say, "You've got to get in touch with your gratitude; for years your parents helped you and sacrificed for you, yet you never learned to verbalize your thankfulness. Now you've got all this gratitude bottled up inside you, and it's not healthy. You're like a walking time bomb of gratitude."

It turns out there is a problem with ventilating anger. The old theory was that you get angry, you ventilate, anger drains off, you get it "out of your system." The problem is, ventilation is tolerable. It is self-reinforcing. People hit, they feel powerful, they want to hit more. Dozens of studies have found that observation and participation in aggressive behavior leads to more, not less, anger and aggression.

That harmless "prayer concern," bless their heart but so and so is just such an idiot, doesn't put the issue to rest, but rather fans the flame for more biting and devouring. Once you get a taste, you realize how good it tastes in the short run. But the Apostle Paul says to be careful, because this will lead to you annihilating one another.

Now there is a really interesting grammatical point to take note of for our understanding of this passage. If you will, travel with me back to 8<sup>th</sup> grade English class. How many of you remember the difference between the subjunctive and indicative mood in verbs? Any grammarians?

Let me give you an example: In the English language there is only one mood for the word “if.” But in Greek we use the Subjunctive mood like this: if you do something, and I’m not sure that you will...(For example: If I were a squirrel I would live in a tree).

The indicative on the other hand says: If you do, and I know that you do. Jesus uses this with great effectiveness when he says: If you love me (and I know that you do) you will keep my commandments.

Paul says in verse 15: If you bite and devour one another, and I know that you are, you will destroy or annihilate one another.

I had an interesting experience this week. As many of you may have seen, I put the title of this week’s message on the board on Miami Street. But I found it rather humorous, if you read it without any context it says: “The Presbyterian Church, You Are Welcome Here, Don’t Bite One Another, Galatians 5:15.” I thought that was pretty funny. And so did a friend of mine who decided to repost a picture of our sign to his social media page, but without my clever explanation. And what followed was, let’s just say, less than charitable, and a bit of self-fulfilling prophecy. People from all over the country, who I don’t know from Adam dissected our church sign every which way from Sunday. And the irony of the whole thing is they didn’t even realize they were doing just what the text tells us not to do.

So I was left with the dilemma, do I identify myself as the Pastor of the church with the sign they had so meticulously dissected? I found myself lying awake early Thursday morning thinking about the perfect retort, or do I keep my mouth shut? It was a really difficult thing to do, because I had such a juicy line to put them all in their place. But then had I not learned anything from the passage either?

Here’s the implication for today’s text. One of the facets of loving one another as Christ did is learning when to resist the urge to snap back with that cutting remark. Resisting the urge to prove that I’m right and you’re wrong. Resisting the urge to protect my image and reputation at the expense of someone else. Resist the urge to capitalize on another’s shortcomings to make myself look good. Because no matter how subtle or seemingly harmless the statement, when we bite back we perpetuate the urge for the other to bite back in their own way, and this cycle continues until the entire relationship has utterly consumed itself.

If you bite and devour one another (which the text says the Galatians were doing), you will utterly consume one another. But you can put an end to the cycle of backbiting, and here is where the spiritual development and growth comes. It comes when you choose to hold your tongue and allow that word or action—hurtful as it is—to remain with you. And this becomes possible when the Spirit of Christ who lives in you speaks the more weighty and precious word about you, one that deflates and invalidates the hurtful one said by someone else.

Recently I listened to a podcast in which they were discussing the phenomena of Internet Trolls. If you’re not familiar with what this is. A person creates a fictional identity online and then goes

around to message boards or websites and says all sorts of horribly demeaning things about a person, and because their identity is masked they get away with it.

One young woman started to investigate her troll and without him knowing figured out who he was. Then invited him to be a part of this podcast. Now he thought he was going to be interviewed for another topic, completely unrelated, but she was going to confront him. What was remarkable was that instead of becoming irate and belittling her attacker, she calmly and confidently said to him: your words about me were injuring, I was extremely hurt by what you said. But, I want you to know that they did not get the best of me, and I do not harbor any resentment toward you, in fact, if anything, I pity you.

And it was remarkable to hear this young man, now looking the person he had said these nasty things in the face and say things like: I had no idea that what I said actually impacted someone, I didn't realize that I had hurt you like that, and I'm so very sorry.

As the book of James says: How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

On our own, this is true. But what the book of Galatians spends all 6 chapters fleshing out is the promise that on our own we cannot keep the laws of God, but with the Spirit takes up residence in us the law of love will guide our steps and shape our actions.

Later in chapter 5 it says that if you are led by the Spirit you are no longer under the law. When the presence of Jesus' Spirit lives in you, you know something about yourself that can withstand any word or accusation, when you have the Spirit of Christ living in you, you realize there is no longer any need level the playing field by offering that juicy rebuttal. When you have the Spirit of Christ in you, you no longer need to put another person down to make yourself look good. When you have the Spirit of Christ in you, you no longer need to fixate on your own image, for you are the reflection and righteousness of Him, and so free love others without pretense, serve one another without reservation, and pray for one another without ceasing.

You are blessed to be a blessing, you have the risen Christ incarnating you through his Spirit, there is a profound truth you need to come to grips with: you are free to receive that peace, and speak peaceably to one another, and the more you flee from the urges to bite one another, the more deeply God's Spirit will inhabit your life.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, you have given each one of us this powerful tool. Our speech can tear and consume, or it can bring healing and hope when it is yoked to your Spirit. On this Independence Day weekend, let us celebrate this profound gift given to us by the sacrifice of so many, by building one another up in love, by speaking words of love and truth over one another, and let the fruit of our speech be nourishing to those around us. And this is only truly possible because your Spirit lives in us, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.