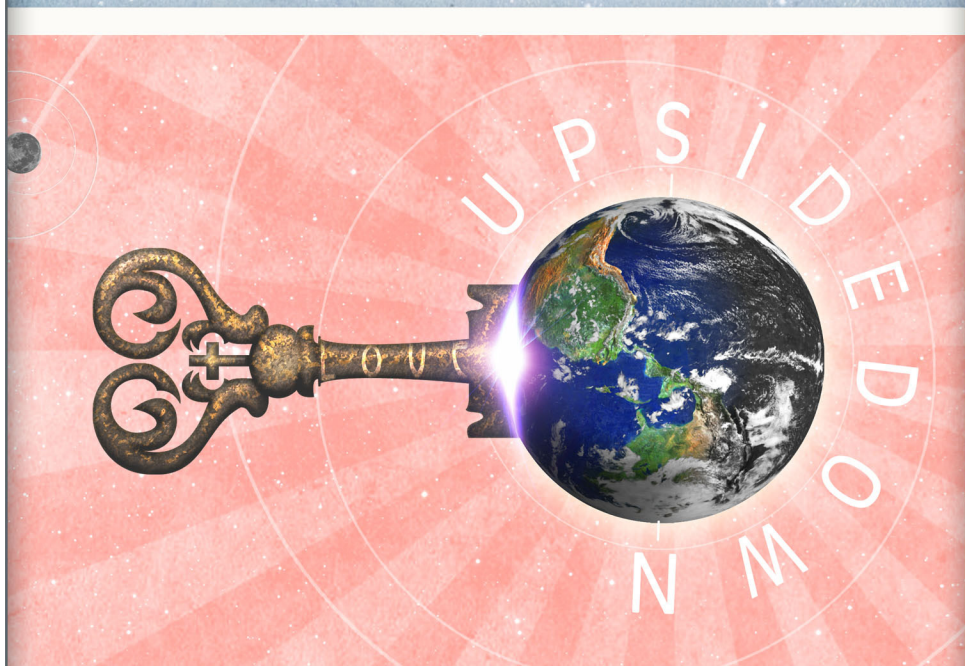


# GOING DEEPER

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

June 5, 2016



## Discussion Guide

### Love Gets Messy

#### Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK

GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

#### Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Do you expect the relationships and people within the Church to be messy or clean and tidy? Could you elaborate?

#### Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Using the notes, discuss the background of

freedom in the ancient world.

- Read Galatians 5.13-16 aloud. Pause. Read the text once more, seeking to hear Paul speaking to you directly.
- Paul notes that followers of Christ in Galatia were called to love one another, but they struggled to do so. Rather, by nature they struggled with one another in destructive ways. Would you say this was a situation peculiar to the Galatian Churches, or is it more common? Could you explain?
- According to Paul, the only way to truly love one another was to live a life guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit (verse 16). Would you agree or disagree? Could you elaborate?
- Read Galatians 5.26-6.5 aloud. Read the text once more, allowing Paul to speak to the issues which make it difficult for God's people to love one another.
- According to Paul, what issues hinder God's people from loving one another? Seek to find as many as possible in the text.
- What relationship, if any, do these issues have with one another?
- Do these issues still exist in the Church today? If so, what forms do they take?
- Paul notes that loving one another is demonstrated in dealing gently with one another's failings, but this is made difficult by our need to compare ourselves with one another. What steps might we take to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that he might limit or eradicate this practice of comparison in us? In our faith communities?
- Consider closing by discussing what it might look like to deal gently with one another in your group. You might consider confessing issues which hinder you from acting in this way, seeking to hold these before the Spirit together.

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

### FREEDOM

The concept of freedom in the ancient world differed greatly from our modern, American concept of freedom. In our American psyche, freedom is often equated with autonomy, the

ability to live free from any form of tyranny or external control. This understanding of freedom, rooted in our narrative as a nation, leads to a deep value for individualism and personal choice. Such thoughts would be foreign to the ears of people in the ancient world.

In the ancient world, people understood freedom not in terms of freedom from but in terms of freedom to or for something. One might refer to this freedom as double freedom; that is, freedom involved the exodus from one form of control so that one could be under a different form of control. Our American sensibilities are offended with anything which smacks of "control," but the ancient person did not feel the same. In the ancient world, people had no real value for individuality. People found their sense of worth, identity, and status from groups to which they were attached, and each group had its own rules governing the appropriate behavior for those within the group. Those who behaved appropriately were in the group while those who defied this behavior were understood to be out of the group. Because identity came from one's connection to a group, people aligned themselves to the codes of conduct required by the group with which they were associated. In this scenario, freedom was experienced when one was brought out of one group thus freeing him from having to follow the behavioral standards of that group. However, because a person had no identity apart from others the experience of freedom also involved the joining of another group which then obligated the person to the behavioral standards of the new group.

This understanding of freedom is what lies behind the teachings of Paul with respect to one's freedom in Christ. To experience freedom in Christ was not to experience autonomy but to experience the movement from one group to another. This group could be the Jewish community or the pagan community, and the group to which one moved was the church which formed a new family unit. We see this in the use of family terms like "brothers" for members of the church. When a person experienced this movement from one group to another, they were freed from the standards of the old group but bound to the standards of the new group. Thus, to move from the Jewish community to the Church involved a freedom from the Law as a moral standard to the obligation of love as the new standard within the

Church (Galatians 5.13). Likewise, to move from the pagan community to the Church involved a freedom from living according to cultural standards and being bound to the life of Christ (Ephesians 4.20-24).

## THE TEXT

### **GALATIANS 5.13-16: FREEDOM TO LOVE**

Paul's letter to the Galatian Church is one of his most severe letters, one in which he is fighting for the very soul of a Church. With Barnabas, Paul started the churches in Galatia on his first missionary journey (Acts 14). However, it seems that in the years following the founding of these churches, Judaizing teachers began to infiltrate these fledgling congregations. These teachers taught that Jesus was not enough to function as a new community. These new communities needed moral standards which would set them off as the people of God. They proposed that circumcision and the Torah (Mosaic Law) were the appropriate standards for such communities of God. It is easy to understand how such teaching might have quickly taken hold within these churches. Paul's gospel message strongly emphasized freedom brought about in the person of Christ. However, Paul did not intend that this freedom simply be freedom from but intended that this freedom was to the "Law" of Christ; that is, Christ's person became the new standard governing morality. However, many Jewish-Christian teachers familiar with the Mosaic Law felt this standard was inadequate. A written standard governing behavior was needed, one which in their minds already existed. Paul argued vehemently that the person of Jesus was enough and that in following his example a person fulfilled the Law of Moses.

Paul is engaged in such an argument with the churches in Galatia and is coming to the end of his arguments in chapter 5. Beginning in verse 13, Paul sums up his entire argument. The people of God (through Christ) were called to be free, a freedom from having to live a life indulging the flesh. Here Paul notes that the freedom he is talking about is anything but a freedom to live apart from God-intended ways. In Paul's mind, flesh stands for that which opposes God. Rather, the freedom God's people experience is a freedom to live in God's intended manner which is to love.

When Christ-communities choose to serve (enslave themselves in the language of the New Testament) one another in love as a standard for being they mark themselves off as God's people because loving one's neighbor as oneself fulfills the entirety of God's moral commands regarding horizontal relationships. Here Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus from Matthew 22.36-40. However, Paul notes that fulfilling this standard of loving one another is atypical within the Galatian congregation. The typical behavior of the Galatians is like that of dogs who bite and snap at one another while they seek to feed. The exact instances to which Paul is referring are lost to us, but it is not difficult to see similar instances of strife within the modern Church. Paul's point is that such behavior, though natural, will lead to the destruction of these fledgling communities. Love must be the standard, but this standard is only possible if one lives a life empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit.

### **GALATIANS 5.26-6.5: LOVE GETS MESSY**

Having mentioned that the standards of Christ-communities might only be lived out by those empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit, Paul turns aside to compare and contrast the lives of those who live by their own strength versus those who live guided and empowered by the Spirit. Having contrasted these lives, Paul returns to the practical issues within the congregation, the biting and tearing of one another which Paul identifies as being rooted in conceit and envy.

Paul presses further into these instances noting that the conceit and envy are actually by-products of the way the Galatian churches are dealing with sin. Paul notes that some in the churches have been caught in trespasses; that is, they have mis-stepped. Paul's matter of fact tone here indicates he assumes such instances to be normal within the Church. God's people are interesting contradictions of order and disorder. When a believer's life becomes disordered, the proper response from those who are led by the Spirit is to restore them with gentleness. It is hard to miss the echo of love being the outcome of being led by the Spirit. Thus, the gentle restoration of people who have fallen into sin within the Church is the loving, Spirit-led response. The problem was that those who were dealing with sin were falling victim to the temptations of pride because they

were helping those who had fallen with an attitude of condescension. They felt they could help because they themselves were above the behaviors of their fallen brethren. However, Paul notes that this was deceptive thinking. No one person in the Church had it all together. The loving approach was to gently help the person with their sin, all the while engaging in self-evaluation which identified one's own shortcomings and to take personal responsibility for these shortcomings. Simply put, the loving response to those who had fallen into sin was to humbly approach, involving oneself in the restoration of the fallen, all the while acknowledging one's own fallenness and need for restoration.

### **REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:**

How do we engage our world in love? We do it by choosing to love one another. Love is the central ethic of the Church, a love which includes love for one another. It is this love for one another which demonstrates our identity as followers of Christ (John 13.34-35), providing an engaging apologetic of our faith. However, loving others is often something to which I give lip-service more than attention. I suppose this is the case in others too, but I can only deal with myself. When I consider why I act in unloving ways, I often come upon the realization that I feel better than others. I know more Scripture. I am better. I know more theology. I am better. I don't struggle with that sin. I am better. I could go on, but the simple point is my entertainment of being better than others in the end separates me from others. They are beneath me. However, it is all a delusion, one I am only able to maintain so long as my standard is others. Sure, in comparison to someone else, I might be better, but should I compare myself with Christ, I am far from perfect. When I compare myself with Christ, I recognize my deep failings and woundings. Interestingly, it is this recognition that enables me to love my fellow believer. When I see my sin in light of Christ, I view the sin of others differently. I have compassion. I have a desire to seek restoration. I recognize that though the sin may be different, the fallen nature of a life apart from God remains the same. Simply put, I see myself in them. I am a peer in need of the same grace. ...a peer much more willing to be gentle because I know how harsh words and actions hurt.

### **REAL LIFE WITH YOU:**

How do we engage our world in love? A great place to start is by loving our fellow believer. Our love for our fellow Christ-follower is a powerful apologetic to who we are and what Christ can do. However, loving other Christ-followers is really hard, particularly when their lives are messy. When we encounter people who love Jesus but whose lives are a mess, we are tempted to push away rather than draw near in love. We push away, in part, because we feel better than our brother, probably because our lives are not messy. At least, our lives are not messy in the same way, but the truth is they are messy, just a different kind of messy. When we recognize this, when we recognize our own messiness, it is harder to justify any feelings of superiority. Rather, we recognize our own deep need for grace which fills us with compassion and a desire to extend restoring grace to others. When we recognize this, the church becomes a field hospital for the broken and not a country club for the put together. We treat one another gently because we know how in need we are of the same gentleness. We accept that the Church is a messy place where lives are in the process of being put back together, our own lives included. This week, we encourage you to consider your expectations of others in the Church. Do you expect that people who make up the Church have their lives put together? Do you expect Church to be messy or clean and tidy? Why might this be? What might it be like to consider that the Church is made up of messy people, and you are one of them? How might this change your understanding of how the Church should and does function? Ponder these thoughts over the week, taking time to journal your thoughts and prayers.



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