

When biblical words convey the wrong message!

The tweet from Israel Folau – the Australian rugby league player – has caused a firestorm across the media in Australia and the world. Israel has lost his job over it.

Folau quoted Galatians 5:19–21 with some change of words, and then added his own additional warning, that all this list of sinners in this passage, will go to hell if they do not repent. We might be left wondering, “Can we no longer quote scripture publicly in today’s world?” and “Is there no longer free speech?”

To quote scripture carelessly without regard to whom the original words were addressed, and without regard to our audience, is reckless and counterproductive. Communication involves not only saying things, but making sure we first hear the message rightly and then convey it correctly. The aim is to get the precise message of the Bible across to the listener.

The word of God not only needs to be quoted, but the message that it originally intended, must be conveyed. We call this process, hermeneutics. Hermeneutics considers the question of context; asks to whom is it addressed; and what was the original intention of the words.

When we take a close look at Galatians 5:19–21, we see it certainly was a warning, but it is actually addressed to Christians and is a call for us not to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. Paul says to his listeners, we used to live like that, but now we don’t want to go back there. “The desires of the flesh are sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you [his fellow believers], as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” And then he goes on, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” The message is one of encouragement to believers, not condemnation to people in the world caught in sin. John in Chapter 3:17 clearly says “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Galatians 5:19–21 is addressed to Christians in the church, so they do not go back to what they once were. It is a call to live by the Spirit, and not the desires of the flesh. And it lifts up the possibility of a new life in the Spirit for those who are still far off.

So please quote the words of scripture with others by all means, but please take time to consider to whom it is addressed, and what it actually says, and then give a clear message of the good news of Christ to the world. He came to save, not to condemn.

Bishop Robert Bartholomaeus

P.S. In our society today it's proven to be no longer helpful to call certain groups to repent. It only causes divisions into "them" and "us", as if some people need to repent while others do not. God's call to repentance is for all whose lives are entangled in selfish actions, thoughts and desires. If we are honest, this applies to all of us.

So the call of the scriptures is to each individual, repent and believe on Christ! The call to repent is for all people. First to those in the church, then to those outside. God's Spirit keeps on showing each individual where they are selfish or self-centred in their thoughts desires and deeds. It is not our job to do what the Spirit alone can do. He wants to bring all people to the truth and so to peace and joy in Christ.