

Our study in the letter to the Galatians has emphasized that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. The law was a guardian pointing people to Christ, but now that He has come and the Spirit has been given to those who believe, we are to be led by the Spirit. Our justification with God comes to us by faith in what Jesus has done for us.

Paul has told us we should be experiencing the freedom that is ours in Christ. He explained that freedom is freedom from this present evil world (1:4<sup>i</sup>). In chapter two verse twenty<sup>ii</sup> he shared that he was free to die to himself and let Christ live in him. In chapter three he declared that we are free from the laws of Moses, from its judgment and condemnation (3:13<sup>iii</sup>). We are even adopted sons who can put on Christ, the mantle of maturity and authority (3:27<sup>iv</sup>; 4:4,5<sup>v</sup>). Because all this is true of those who are in Jesus, why would they listen to those insisting that they need to be circumcised? Did they really think they could add something to Jesus' finished work on the cross?

As I thought on this Dr. Zeus like poem came to me: O creature of dust, How you think that you must, Do it all on your own, To the wind you have sown. But if you will abide, In His wounded side, His strength it will do, For it's Him and not you!

Now the letter turns to our sanctification in daily life by the Holy Spirit. By that I mean working out our salvation in the way we live in this fallen world.<sup>13</sup> *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.* Galatians 5:13 From this point in the letter, Paul turns to the solutions that will keep them on the track, running the race to the finish. Some commentators refer to this last portion of the letter as the ethical section.

Paul begins this section by reminding them that we are called to freedom. In America we think of this as the freedom given to us in the Bill of Rights. But biblical freedom is the rights we have as adopted children of God. We are free to yield to the Spirit and liberated from our enslaving old nature and the rules that were meant to keep it in check. That does not mean we can break the moral boundaries that relate to the nature of God such as lying, stealing, adultery, murder, etc. But we are freed from religious rituals and societal rules of the nation of Israel. That is why Christians chose to worship on Sunday instead of the Sabbath. It was the first day of the week, a new beginning, the day Jesus rose from death, the day the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost. That is why Peter referring to the law said, "...why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" -Acts 15:10 The sacrifices and the 613 rules of behavior are all replaced by the Spirit of God in our hearts, which is on a much higher level.

The law was given to us for our good (Deuteronomy 10:13<sup>vi</sup>), but the Spirit gets at the heart of God which was reason behind the laws. *The Christian life is neither the life of legalism nor the life of license.*<sup>vii</sup> Living by the Spirit is not a path between the two but rather on another plain altogether.

Think of it like this: good parents give their children chores and rules to guide them and keep them safe. But what if the child knew the heart of his parents? There would be no need for the rules, as that good child would always act in good way that would please the parents. In a similar way the Spirit gives us the heart of God causing us to act in ways that are pleasing to God. And as we see in the next verse, the Spirit helps us to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the second great command, the Father's will, and what is best for all.

*14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* Galatians 5:14 Paul warns them and all who read the letter that being freed from the law does not mean free to yield to the old nature, to run out of bounds. **Grace does not set us free to sin, but it sets us free from sin.** It is the freedom to serve others through love. When the old nature reigns over us, we can't break free from selfishness. It is like the immature child who tries to get out of his chores and skirt the rules. He may love his parents, but he loves himself more. We see a need, but we harden our hearts and do what we want. We think we are free, but we are really enslaved to selfishness. That damages relationships. It is one reason for the destruction of societies. It is the reason idealistic philosophies don't work. It's why communes eventually fail. Man's only hope is Jesus!

So many people talk of altruism and think how wonderful it would be if everyone was generous... **toward me!** It is humorous and at the same time sad that some of the greatest proponents of these unrealistic ideals never worked a day in their lives and have a terrible record of giving. They do not consider the biblical truth that the heart of man is desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9<sup>viii</sup>). That is because they think so highly of themselves. Community is only possible when people are united in their goal and put others above themselves. That is what the Spirit frees us to do.

When Jesus reigns in our hearts, we can serve others and find joy in doing so. He frees us from ourselves. We are freed from those chains of selfishness more fully described in verses 19 to 21<sup>ix</sup> and find that we can freely live in a way that is pleasing to the heart of God. We can serve one another without any other motive than love. That is a rare thing in this world. It shows that Jesus has made a difference in our hearts (1 Peter 2:12<sup>x</sup>).

Paul is paraphrasing Jesus' words, "Love God with your all and your neighbor as yourself. On these, hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40<sup>xi</sup>). Jews were waiting for a single law that boiled it all down, and this was it. It is our two most important commands. However, you can't do one without the other, so it is essentially that great command they were longing to receive. The world in which this is lived out by *all* who are in it is called heaven. But **we bring a bit of heaven to earth when we live it here.** We bring heaven to our church when we live it out among ourselves. When we don't, we find the next verse to be true.

*15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.* Galatians 5:15 "Bite and devour," what savage but appropriate terms. Pastor Nickells was telling me about fishing for Pike in Canada. Sometimes you will pull in a big one and as it gets right up to the boat a bigger one will come pull it off your hook and eat it! That is the kind of ugliness Paul is describing when a critical spirit is given free rein. There are such beings as Christian cannibals, in a spiritual sense of course.

If love doesn't prevail in a church, our flesh nature will destroy the sense of community. I have seen couples and individuals who had enjoyed the fellowship, and said so, but then turned critical because something didn't go the way they wanted. They quit loving the body and speaking well of them because no one got on board with their agenda or would make the changes they wanted. They admitted they could no longer worship with the body. That is because they no longer loved the body, and when you cannot love and prefer others above yourself, you cannot worship (Philippians 2:3<sup>xii</sup>). When those with the same gripe get together, a faction builds, and if it becomes a substantial part of the church, the division will destroy the effectiveness and testimony of the entire church, at least for a time, if not permanently.

The biting and devouring can happen on both sides of any issue. **If we cannot speak well of someone, we shouldn't say anything at all.** We should be praying for them and for ourselves to see if we may be in the wrong. Love should never stop (1 Corinthians 13:8<sup>xiii</sup>). Love cares and tries to understand others. That is the Spirit at work in us. Yet, we all still struggle with our old nature – the flesh (Galatians 5:17<sup>xiv</sup>). We are waiting for the final deliverance when our unredeemed humanness will bother us no more (Romans 8:23<sup>xv</sup>).

*The flesh is the sworn enemy of relationships and community; self-centered passions and desires are what wreak all the havoc in our relationships. And the flesh is always looking for a beachhead in our lives, which can then become a base of operations from which the flesh can work to undermine every single one of our relationships, whether with God or with our spouse or with our children or with our employer or neighbor or roommate or classmate.*

*The flesh is utterly ruthless and will seize every opportunity we give it. It's always with us, and the world around us is always encouraging us to let down our defenses and let it gain ground.*

*In what ways do we give the flesh an opportunity to establish a beachhead or a base of operations in our lives? Here are some of the most common:*

- *We provide opportunity for the flesh when we coddle an unforgiving spirit or harbor a grudge toward another person.*
- *We provide opportunity for the flesh when we fail to overlook minor offenses. As fallen, sinful human beings, we continually throw pebbles into one another's path. That's inevitable. But Proverbs 19:11<sup>xvi</sup> says it is wisdom to overlook an offense. And yet because our flesh is so vain and proud, it is easily offended—often by even the slightest little thing!*
- *We provide opportunity for the flesh when we allow ourselves to put a negative spin on the actions of others. In that magnificent celebration of love found in 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul says that love “believes all things” (v.7<sup>xvii</sup>).*
- *We provide opportunity for the flesh when we indulge ourselves in speaking negatively about others. “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers” (James 4:11<sup>xviii</sup>). “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29<sup>xix</sup>). It is in view of passages like these that **Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to the following bold conclusion: “Thus it must be a decisive rule of all Christian community life that each individual is prohibited from talking about another Christian in secret.”** Why? As he says, “Often we combat our evil thoughts [i.e., the flesh] most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be verbalized.” He then offers this encouragement: “Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the start, individuals will make an amazing discovery. They will be able to stop constantly keeping an eye on others, judging them, condemning them, and putting them in their places and thus doing violence to them. They can now allow other Christians to live freely, just as God has brought them face to face with each other.”*
- *We provide opportunity for the flesh when we engage in conversation with those who are negative or when we continue in conversation when the conversation turns negative. Conversations can turn negative in various ways, as soon as one of those respectable little vices of the tongue shows up on the scene, things like gossip, critical speech, harsh words, insults, sarcasm, ridicule. We also, frankly, need to avoid*

- negative people. Even some believers are chronically negative; they consistently spew criticism or harsh words or sarcasm. As a result, it's tough to be around them without coming away feeling oily and dirty, as if somehow we've been defiled. Pray for those folks. Seek to build them up in love. But as a rule avoid going out for coffee with them.*
- *We provide opportunity for the flesh when we fail to deal with our personal grievances swiftly and directly. In Ephesians 4 we find the instruction, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (v. 26<sup>xx</sup>). But notice what Paul adds: "And give no opportunity to the devil" (v. 27<sup>xxi</sup>). When we are slow to deal with our personal grievances, we give not only the flesh but the devil himself an opportunity to make inroads into our lives and into our communities. We must deal with personal grievances swiftly. But we also need to deal with them directly—that is, person-to-person and, whenever possible, face-to-face. Here is where we all need to be much more cautious about using technologies for communication. I have come to the conclusion that email (and in our day I would add texting) is a high-speed landing craft for the flesh, and I'm increasingly convinced that we would all be far better off if we committed to never deliver any bad news to anyone by means of email but only face-to-face, or if that's impossible, by telephone, and if that's impossible, by a handwritten letter. It's far too easy to dehumanize the person we're addressing when all we have of that person's presence is his or her name in the address bar of the email we're ready to fire off.* <sup>xxii</sup>

I have witnessed the destructive power of criticism tear churches apart. If there is a real problem, one with facts that are serious, take it to the person first in love and gentleness. If it is not received take it to one other person, a godly person who is impartial. And if there is still no resolution, take it to the elders of the church. This is the way Jesus told us to deal with offenses in Matthew 18.

One thing that I lament is the lack of dedication to one another in a church body. We tend to be in our little cliques and know little if anything about others in the congregation. It is only natural that you will be closer to those of like age and interests, but we still need to get to know and serve one another in love. We need to live the analogy of the church being like a body. We all need one another. I am baffled by people who commit to a church and then just walk away one day with no explanation. It is like amputating a finger just because you felt like it. "Who cares what the effect is on the rest of the body and what happens to those missions they support!" If you are truly called to some other body of believers, let us give you a sendoff party so you can go with our love. We've done that numerous times.

Do you know the missions we support? Have you ever written them a letter of encouragement or complemented them on social media? The blessing of small churches is that we have an opportunity to live this out. Larger churches have very little real community unless it is in small home groups. My challenge to all of us is to get to know others in the church and our missions. Find out their background. Learn if they have any need that you might be able to help with. While you might not be able to connect with all our missions, select a couple to become familiar with and stay up with their progress and encourage them. Let the love of Christ flow through you to others in the church and to our missionaries. Let us adopt Bonhoeffer's suggestion to say nothing negative about anyone. If we think someone is struggling, let us encourage them and pray for them. If someone has a weakness, come

alongside and help them. Get to know and love one another because that is pleasing to our Father. That is walking in the Spirit.

*<sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*

Galatians 5:16 This is Paul's Holy Spirit inspired description of life in Christ that is free from the bondage of the law or the flesh. It is the answer to the sinful nature that we had crucified with Jesus when it raises its ugly head out of the coffin. The word "walk" in this verse means to tread all around or be occupied with something. In other words, we are to do all that we do in the Spirit instead of in our old nature. Only a Spirit filled person can do this. Only the man or woman who is dependent moment by moment on the life of Christ in them can continually walk in the Spirit. Try to do it on your own and you will soon find yourself in the flesh. We must be looking unto Jesus (Hebrews 12:2<sup>xxiii</sup>), while praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17<sup>xxiv</sup>), with minds renewed by the Word of God (Romans 12:2<sup>xxv</sup>). We must rely on the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit if we are to live our passage for today. (See vs 24,25<sup>xxvi</sup>; Romans 5:5<sup>xxvii</sup>; 8:4<sup>xxviii</sup>; 13:14.<sup>xxix</sup>)

The Greek is very emphatic. Walk in the Spirit and you will absolutely not in any way give in to your fleshly desires. Anything that takes you away from walking in the Spirit is wrong. This tells us that if we see ourselves yielding to those desires, we know we are not walking in the Spirit. Paul is insisting that we understand that the Spirit is an enabling power that is stronger than the desires of the flesh. We know how powerfully the flesh tempts us, but the power of the Spirit is stronger. We can realize that power if we will walk in the Spirit.

Only the ones who have received the forgiveness Jesus merited for us on the cross can ask for and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32<sup>xxx</sup>). Walking in the Spirit is simply yielding to His life in you instead of doing your own thing. And the more we let Him be our guide, saturate our minds with the Word of God, and pray without ceasing, the more it will become our new way of life. That is working out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12<sup>xxxi</sup>). Why the fear and trembling? It is because we know how easily we can fall back into that old nature and how destructive it can be.

Brothers and sisters, let us walk in the Spirit and love one another. That is not the road between works on the one hand and indulgence on the other, it is an altogether higher road. Martin Luther said it so well: *"Each of us should become a Christ to the other. And as we are Christs to one another, the result is that Christ fills us all and we become a truly Christian community."*<sup>xxxii</sup> That will make Wayside a little island of heaven in Sedona. It will draw others to Jesus. But most of all it will please the heart of our Father who gave us everything and longs to see us eternally blessed.

Questions:

- 1 What has the letter emphasize to this point? What is the next emphasis?
- 2 What is the biblical freedom Paul is referencing?
- 3 What is the word that fulfills the laws of God?
- 4 How can we bring a bit of heaven to earth?
- 5 Why do people bite and devour one another?
- 6 What wreaks havoc on our relationships?
- 7 In what ways do we give the flesh a beachhead?
- 8 How did Jesus say to handle offenses?
- 9 Which is stronger, Spirit or flesh? Why?
- 10 How can we be a more Christlike community?

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<sup>i</sup> **Galatians 1:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

<sup>ii</sup> **Galatians 2:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

<sup>iii</sup> **Galatians 3:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—

<sup>iv</sup> **Galatians 3:27-28 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

<sup>v</sup> **Galatians 4:4-5 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

<sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

<sup>vi</sup> **Deuteronomy 10:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?

<sup>vii</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Through the Bible Commentary, Galatians*, p.95

<sup>viii</sup> **Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

<sup>ix</sup> **Galatians 5:19-21 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,

<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,

<sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>x</sup> **1 Peter 2:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

<sup>xi</sup> **Matthew 22:37-40 (ESV)**

<sup>37</sup> And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

<sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

<sup>xii</sup> **Philippians 2:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

<sup>xiii</sup> **1 Corinthians 13:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

<sup>xiv</sup> **Galatians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

<sup>xv</sup> **Romans 8:23 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

<sup>xvi</sup> **Proverbs 19:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

<sup>xvii</sup> **1 Corinthians 13:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>xviii</sup> **James 4:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

<sup>xix</sup> **Ephesians 4:29 (ESV)**

<sup>29</sup> Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

<sup>xx</sup> **Ephesians 4:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

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<sup>xxi</sup> **Ephesians 4:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> and give no opportunity to the devil.

<sup>xxii</sup> Todd Wilson, *Preaching the Word - Galatians: Gospel-Rooted Living*.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **1 Thessalonians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing,

<sup>xxv</sup> **Romans 12:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>xxvi</sup> **Galatians 5:24-25 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **Romans 5:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Romans 8:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

<sup>xxix</sup> **Romans 13:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

<sup>xxx</sup> **Acts 5:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

<sup>xxxi</sup> **Philippians 2:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,

<sup>xxxii</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), p. 84.