

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part nineteen - Teaching #2167

Sunday, February 27th, 2022 - 10 a.m.

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“DO NOT TURN YOUR FREEDOM INTO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE FLESH”

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:13-15 - “For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. [14] For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. [15] But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.”

The tone of Paul’s writing changes as we reach the last two chapters of this letter to the churches at Galatia. Actually, he begins to address the Galatians directly, rather than rebuking and addressing the issues of the false teachers. As with most of Paul’s letters, his concerns become more practical as he wraps up his thoughts. Most of Paul’s letters outline the theological concerns first, and then, in an attempt to *apply* the theology to life, he gives practical instructions and encouragements toward the end.

Verse thirteen opens almost as a clone of **verse one**. Look at the two side by side: *“It was for freedom that Christ set us free....”*(5:1). Compare this with **verse 13** - *“For you were called to freedom....”* But then comes the very important distinction between these two verses. Both verses outline the *call* to freedom. And then both verses outline a *threat* to living in this freedom. But the *threat is different in each verse*:

In chapter five, verse one, the threat to freedom is slavery to the legal keeping of the law - ***“For freedom, Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and don’t submit again to a yoke of slavery.”*** But this is ***not*** the threat to freedom that Paul pinpoints in chapter five, verse thirteen - ***“For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.”***

Can you see what Paul is doing here? He has just spent four chapters arguing the futility of the law as a means to earning one’s righteous standing before God. He has argued convincingly that the law was never ***intended*** to be a ladder by which we could all climb up to heaven. God has always meant to ***supply*** the righteousness He required through ***divine promise and provision.***

God gave the promise of righteousness to Abraham and all who shared his faith - **Galatians 3:6-9 - “...just like Abraham who believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness? [7] You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham’s sons. [8] Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed through you. [9] Consequently, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.” - IPAD TEXT**

God never changed His plan to bless those who came to Him in faith. This is the point Paul was making when he showed that the law was something **added** - something that came **after** the promise of righteousness was given to Abraham - **Galatians 3:17-18** - “My point is this: The law, which came 430 years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously established by God and thus cancel the promise. [18] For if the inheritance is based on the law, it is no longer based on the promise; but God has graciously given it to Abraham through the promise.” - **IPAD TEXT**

Those who are in Christ Jesus by faith are Abraham’s true descendants. This was Paul’s whole argument in chapters 3 and 4. In chapter four Paul unfolded the account of Abraham’s child of promise (**Isaac**) as opposed to the child by human works (**Ishmael**). We, as we place our faith in Jesus Christ - as we receive **His** righteousness, rather than relying on our own - are in the line of the free children of promise through the freewoman, **Sarah**. We are not in the line of the slave woman, **Hagar** - **Galatians 4:31** - “Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of a slave but of the free woman.” - **IPAD TEXT**

Now, after Paul has built such a convincing case against these legalizing Judaisers, there is one more danger he must deal with before wrapping up his letter. It would be very easy for these people, upon hearing Paul's argument being built up, layer upon layer, to conclude that legalism under the demands of the law was the **only** danger they had to avoid. But it wasn't. And that's the reason for highlighting the distinction between the threats to freedom as they're outlined in the last parts of verse one and verse 13.

There are **two ways** to live in bondage. One is to assume the sole role of establishing your own righteousness before God **apart from Jesus Christ and His cross**. The other way to live in bondage is to think that freedom in Christ means **freedom to live as I please, independent from the indwelling Spirit's control of my actions**.

Think of our deliverance from the **bondage of the law** as Israel's deliverance from the **bondage of Egypt**. In fact, we know that using this as a picture of our own deliverance has good Scriptural approval because it is used as a picture of our deliverance over and over in the New Testament. Actually, Jesus calls us to regularly celebrate what we call the Lord's Supper as a visual, physical reminder of what He accomplished for us, and He modeled this ordinance after the Passover meal, celebrated by the Jews on the eve of their deliverance from Egypt.

And if there's anything we're meant to learn about Israel's deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, it is this: the ***deliverance they experienced wasn't just deliverance from Egypt. It was deliverance to the Promised Land.*** They were called to freedom, all right, but not a ***static*** freedom - not a ***freedom to go and do whatever they pleased.*** Moses himself described Israel's freedom in perfect terms when he addressed Pharaoh - **Exodus 9:1 - "Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him: This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me." - IPAD TEXT**

So we need to remember the framework of Paul's words in these closing chapters. He gradually turns his attention from one bondage-producer to another. We all need to know this very well. We all vacillate between one of these two extremes in the church.

Either we focus on outward customs, rules and regulations, and tabulate the keeping of them as the ***personal achievement of the righteousness Father God requires,*** or, probably more commonly in today's church (and probably as a reaction to the overly legal approach of past generations) we come to honestly believe that grace and freedom in Christ Jesus means we no longer need to fear sin and worldliness. Jesus automatically covers us with His divine credit card of righteousness, and we can spend all we want on our own desires and ambitions. ***"Indulge yourself! The check has been taken care of at Calvary."***

This second error is the grave danger to which Paul now turns his attention:

- 1) **CHRIST'S CALL TO EVERY CHRISTIAN IS A CALL TO RADICAL FREEDOM, AND FREEDOM CAN'T BE MAINTAINED THROUGH THE EMPTY HABIT OF LIVING FOR SELF**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:13 - "For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only *don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.*"

As surely as the condemnation of the law will destroy your freedom, so will the casting aside of restraint in the pursuit of your own pleasure. Freedom is always a risky thing. That's because ***freedom is not a thing complete in itself.*** It is only the ***opportunity for something else.***

Remember the illustration of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Israel was set free to embark on her journey. The people were to ***use*** their freedom to get to where God wanted them to be. Theirs was ***freedom heading somewhere.*** Those who think of freedom merely as ***casting off restraint*** - who picture freedom merely as the capacity to ***do their own thing*** - always suffer the most cruel and suffocating bondage in God's world.

So Paul pleads with these people - having just denounced the danger of returning to the bondage of putting themselves under the laws of ethnic Judaism to earn the righteousness God had promised and freely provided through Jesus Christ - he pleaded with these people not to ***squander and prostitute their freedom by giving opportunity for the flesh - “For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love....”***

Look at the things Paul has on his mind when he talks about the “flesh.” **Galatians 5:19-21 - “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, [20] idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, [21] envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things — as I warned you before — that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” - IPAD TEXT**

Every one of those things is a free choice wasted! Every one of them represents the evaporation of fullness of joy. Every one of them is a picture of freedom crushed by unbearable bondage. Every one of them is a picture of loss of self respect and self control. Every one of them began in ***opportunity*** and ended in being ***eternally shut out of the kingdom of God. “Don’t be so blind and stupid with your freedom!,”*** Paul says.

2) **FREEDOM CAN ONLY BE PROTECTED AND SAVORED IN CHRIST AND THROUGH LOVE**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:13-14 - “For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but *serve one another through love.* [14] For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Having described the ***danger*** of losing our precious freedom, Paul now offers the ***antidote*** - “***....don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.***”(13b). Or, to put the same idea in different words, ***loving service to others is the way not to turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh.*** Or, even more simply, ***loving service to others protects and enhances my own freedom in Christ.***

The real question now is “**How? - How does loving service to others preserve my freedom in Christ?**” The answer is **loving service to others shares out of our fullness in Christ, while the works of the flesh are generated out of our desire to fill our emptiness.**

Serving others **exercises** our freedom and fullness in Christ, like lifting weights exercises our muscles in a gymnasium. Conversely, catering to the flesh only exaggerates our own frantic scramble to quench our own inner emptiness.

All of this has its roots in our own relationship with Jesus Christ. Galatians 5:13-14 can't be separated from Galatians 2:20 - “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” - IPAD TEXT

Each act of loving service to others is rooted in, and **demonstrates** our own satisfaction in God through Christ Jesus. We can love people selflessly because we are no longer **using people**, or **using things** to fill up our empty lives. Through Christ, we love people out of the **fullness** we have already found in Him through the Spirit.

This is the huge practical difference the Holy Spirit makes in our lives. All of the works of the flesh are motivated by the desire to fill our own emptiness. But love, says Paul, “....**does not seek its own**” (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Why? Because love is the **overflow of a full life**. There is no **desperation** in it. Love is the overflow of a **free** life that isn't enslaved to filling itself up by **acquiring things** or **manipulating people**. Christ-filled love is like the overflow of a fountain. The life of the flesh is like a vacuum cleaner that just sucks and sucks, trying to fill itself up.

That's why the life of the flesh will always destroy true freedom. It always becomes desperate, binding, and habitual. The free life of love is always a **choice**. The life of the flesh is always a **craving**. The life of the flesh is always driven by **emptiness**.

Find me a person who is only fully engaged when he is **acquiring things** or **dominating people** and I'll show you an empty person - a person who hasn't fully discovered the richness of life in Christ.

Find me a person who is obsessed with **personal vengeance** and **evening up scores with those who have wronged him** and I'll show you a person who hasn't found his personal satisfaction in the richness of Christ's mercy and forgiveness.

Find me a person for whom the only ***buzz life holds is his frantic social life and the numbing of his senses in the fastest party*** and I'll show you a person who, if he could only see it, has not filled the void at the center of his life with pleasures evermore in Christ Jesus.

Remember the difference between a fountain overflowing in fullness and a vacuum, sucking up all it can in emptiness. That's why freedom can only come through the love of Christ and never through catering to the flesh.

3) HOW SPIRITUAL PEOPLE FULFILL THE LAW OF GOD

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:14 - "For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself."

A Spirit-filled life is not ***under*** the law as a means of earning righteousness before God. Nor is he ***bypassing*** the law in an attempt to live life independently of God's will. Rather, the spiritual person ***fulfills*** the law through his passion for Christ and for others.

The spiritual person **does** fulfill the law of God. The **sacrificial laws and regulations** of the Old Testament are already fulfilled in Christ Jesus, and I am **“in Christ”** through faith in His finished work. The **moral law of God**, the law Paul says is written on our hearts, is fulfilled as I love God with all my heart and love my neighbor as myself. All of those fleshly manifestations in **5:19-21** are the exact opposite of these two powerplants of love for God and love for others. Love fulfills the whole law.

Here’s how. The love Christ has lavished on me becomes the pattern and motive of my love for others:

IPAD TEXT - 2 Corinthians 5:14-19 - “For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion, that one died for all, and therefore all died. [15] And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised. [16] From now on, then, we do not know anyone from a worldly perspective. Even if we have known Christ from a worldly perspective, yet now we no longer know him in this way. [17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! [18] Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. [19] That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us.”

Notice how the whole process has its roots in love. First, there is the fullness of Christ’s love for us - **“*For the love of Christ compels us....*” (14)**. We ***move and act dominated by the wondrous fullness of that love***. Then we ***reach out to the world*** with that same love - **“*God....committed to us the ministry of reconciliation....*” (18)**. We fulfill the law of God through love, just as a husband fulfills the law of faithfulness and fidelity as a ***byproduct*** of being passionately in love with his wife.

4) WHERE UGLY, VIOLENT LIVING COMES FROM

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:15 - “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.”

This is more than a cute conclusion to this section on freedom being found only through walking in the love of God. I said before that loving acts are free because they come from the overflow of the fulness of God’s all-satisfying love in our hearts. And then I said that the life of the flesh can only bring bondage because it is motivated by the desperate craving to fill the emptiness in the heart. Things must be **acquired** and people must be **controlled**.

That’s why Paul closes with this picture of animals devouring each other. This is what animals **do** when they are **empty** and **desperate**. They can’t help it. They aren’t free. They are driven by instinct and appetite.

This is Paul’s whole point. This is the only possible result of the life of the flesh. The pursuit of **self-interest** is the cruelest life of all. It eats everyone up in the end. No wonder Paul says, **“Walk in the Spirit, and do not fulfill the desires of the flesh.”**