

Living in Freedom

What better way to look ahead to a new year than to talk about what it means to be led by the Spirit? We return this week to our study on Galatians and this week and next we'll dig into chapter 5 and its crucial lessons.

To this point, as I'm sure you'll remember, Paul has talked at great length about what the law does and what it cannot do. It shows us our sin - it can't help us do better. It reveals how far we fall short of God's standards, but it doesn't make us more able to bridge the gap - only grace does that. At the end of chapter 4, he finally comes to his major point about how to deal with the agitators who are so insistent on perverting the Gospel message that Paul has been preaching to the Galatians. They want Christianity to be Jewish as well as Christian. They want to keep their identity as Jews because of the advantages within the Roman Empire that pertain just to Jews. Paul says, "Get rid of the slave and her son"; move them out of your fellowship and don't allow them to influence anyone else with their distortion of the message we are preaching about Jesus Messiah.

The question is - and I've been asked this question during this series - if we can't live by the law, if the law's primary purpose isn't to tell us right from wrong, then how are we to live? Who makes the rules? How do we know when we're pleasing God or not pleasing Him? How do we show the world the blessings of following God's ways if we can't learn His ways from the law of Moses? Where do we learn them? The list of questions keeps on going and keeps on growing.

The most liberal Christians, the ones who don't take the Bible literally, who don't believe in miracles, who reject things like the virgin birth or the resurrection - at least in their plain, literal sense, also reject the law. So, if they reject the law because they can't take the Scriptures seriously, aren't we doing the same thing if we aren't fully submitted to the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures? These are important questions and we're going to have to get answers from the text as we work our way through the rest of Paul's letter. Let's start, then, with the beginning of chapter five:

So Messiah has really set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law. Listen! I, Paul, tell you this: If you are counting on circumcision to make you right with God, then Christ, or Messiah, cannot help you. I'll say it again. If you are trying to find favour with God by being circumcised, you must obey all of the regulations in the whole law of Moses. For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace.

(5:1-4)

If you thought that Paul would back off a little after making his appeal to the Galatians to rid themselves of the agitators, this gives you an answer: No way. Still, Paul refers to the argument that obedience to the external requirements of the law of Moses is still required as slavery and he pleads with the Galatians to guard their freedom. "Make sure that you stay free and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law." We need to protect what Jesus has given us, not treat it in such a casual way that we can add or

subtract whatever it is we think might be important. It's not our preferences, or our paranoia, or our legalistic tendencies, or our fears and doubts that are the basis for what the Gospel is and what it teaches. The Gospel, the Good News, is God's great gift to us and our choice is simply to accept or reject it, not change it.

I know that the world would have us see everything in shades of grey - that there is no black and white and we must see all sides of every picture. But Paul is making a very black and white distinction here: "If you are counting on circumcision (read that as saying, 'committing yourself to obeying the laws of Moses'), to make you right with God, then Christ cannot help you." In other words, if we reject the forgiveness and new life that God offers us in Jesus, we're on our own. It's us and the Judge and all we can plead is our perfection in keeping each and every one of God's laws. Who really wants that? Paul says that the person who wants to be able to justify themselves before God on the basis of their own performance has been cut off from Christ. That person is no longer under the grace of God, but has removed themselves from grace, has fallen away from grace, and is now entirely subject to law, to performance.

So, no, Paul is not backing off, not compromising his earlier declarations concerning the law, but he still hasn't really told us the way forward. Let's get to that now:

But we who live by the Spirit eagerly wait to receive everything promised to us who are right with God through faith. For when we place our faith in Messiah Jesus, it makes no difference to God whether we are circumcised or not circumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love. (5:5,6)

That's a loaded two verses, so let's take a little time to unpack them. The first phrase tells us what the opposite of living under the law is all about: "we who live by the Spirit". Trying to achieve a right standing with God through the human effort of striving to do better, to be better, according to God's law, seems like a noble thing to strive for. What could God want more than our very best efforts at being good? Isn't that the very essence of being a Christian - being a better person, someone who does what God wants, choosing His ways rather than our own ways? That's what the world thinks that being a Christian is all about and that's why they are so taken aback when Christians fail. Think about people you know who stopped going to church because someone in the church hurt them in some way. Think about the labels the world gives to the Christian church - words like 'hypocrites' suggest that they are of the opinion that we are called to a higher standard, that they should expect us to be better people than they are. But there's a little secret here: we only do better, we only live more lovingly, more sacrificially, in greater harmony with God's purposes, when we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit.

D.L. Moody, a well-known preacher and publisher from the second half of the nineteenth century, once held up a glass half full of water and asked his audience, "How can I get the air out of this glass?" Someone suggested that he suck it out with a pump and others had other suggestions. After a few people had a go, Moody picked up a pitcher of water and filled the glass - the air was now gone. He then explained

that the Christian life is not accomplished by “sucking out a sin here and there,” but by being filled with the Spirit.

Now, if, as Paul clearly says, the purpose of the law was to show us that we aren’t as good as we thought we were, that, left to our own will power, we will consistently fail to measure up to God’s standards of righteousness, then our continuing efforts to prove God, and Paul, wrong will be frustrating and will likely produce some of that ugly fruit that people have been hurt by.

The answer is being filled with and led by the Spirit - and there are two other parts to these two verses that help fill out that picture. The first is the word “faith”. We are “right with God through faith”, and “When we place our faith in Messiah Jesus, it makes no difference to God whether we are circumcised or not.” Faith is key to this life in the Spirit. We have to trust that He is speaking to us, that He has things for us to do, that He wants to be involved in our decision-making. Our ongoing trust in God is shown by our reliance on Him.

We live in the light of God’s promises to us. We trust that the One who made those promises is reliable. Our faith, our trusting in Him, makes the connection between ourselves and the Holy Spirit. It creates in us the expectation that the Spirit is speaking and that He is speaking to us, about our situation, our need, our decision-making. So, there’s “living by the Spirit” and there’s our faith-response to God, trusting the Spirit. The other thing that stands out to me in this passage is the phrase, “faith expressing itself in love.”

We know how genuine faith, real trusting in God, works. It makes itself evident in the way we learn to love other people. If we are trusting in a God who loves us, who sacrificed Himself in humility and grace and in agonizing death for us, who forgives our sins, who heals and helps us through this life, then we will want to become like Him, and that means learning to love like He loves. That’s the necessary fruit of the new life that takes hold of us when we receive the loving grace of God into our mess.

So let’s review this: we are not obligated to keep a set of rules, but to live according to the leading of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us because of our faith and who expresses Himself through us in love to others.

Rules are easier, in the sense that it’s all black and white; you know what you’re supposed to do and you obey or not, feel guilty or not, bend the rules or not - you know how it goes. Trusting in the leading of the Spirit is relational, it requires listening rather than just memorizing. It requires, as any relationship does, that we grow in our ability to hear, to respond, to love. And that’s the guiding principle - and Jesus told us as much in the Gospels - the guiding principle is love. Jesus said that the greatest commandments, what sums up all the law and the prophets, is that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and that we love our neighbour as ourself.

I could get stuck on that part of the passage, but we need to move on. Paul now addresses the personal challenges that the Galatians are facing:

You were getting along so well. Who has interfered with you to hold you back from following the truth? It certainly isn't God, for He is the one who called you to freedom. But it takes only one wrong person among you to infect all the others — a little yeast spreads quickly through the whole batch of dough. I am trusting the Lord to bring you back to believing as I do about these things. God will judge that person, whoever it is, who has been troubling and confusing you. (7-10)

I'm going to skip verses 11 and 12 where Paul argues further for the integrity of his message. Now, from 13:

For you, dear friends, have been called to live in freedom — not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: Love your neighbour as yourself. But if instead of showing love among yourselves, you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.
(13-15)

This passage gives us a glimpse into how desperate the situation in the Galatian churches had become. Instead of showing love to one another, they were “biting and devouring one another”, or coming very close to it. And so Paul has to warn them, “Beware of destroying one another.” And it may have been that the agitators had departed and there was only one person left who was stirring the pot: “it takes only one wrong person among you to infect all the others ... God will judge that person, whoever it is, who has been troubling and confusing you.” One person, agitating for legalism and dismissing Paul’s presentation of the Gospel has managed to deprive this once-excited group of Christian believers of their joy and freedom in Christ.

In that context, you see the significance of Paul’s question at the beginning of this paragraph: “Who has interfered with you to hold you back from following the truth?” Who robbed you? Who has held you back? It certainly isn’t God; He’s the One who called you to freedom. Again we see the back and forth between slavery and freedom that we’ve seen earlier in Galatians, especially in chapter 4. God called you to freedom. One person has been at you, hounding you to give up that freedom and you’ve given in to the pressure. You’re ready to abandon the grace of Christ for the hopeless task of trying to earn your way into God’s favour through your perfect obedience to God’s law. You’re ready to forsake Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and prove yourself worthy of salvation on your own merits. We have a phrase for that in our day, it’s: “Good luck with that.”

Again, as Paul pinpoints the cause of the Galatians’ distress, he keeps coming back to the truly good news that is the Gospel. God is the One who has called you to freedom. You, dear friends, have been called to live in freedom. The whole law can be summed up in this one command: Love your neighbour as yourself.

Now, here’s the irony of the situation in Galatia. They were being persuaded by someone to place them-selves under the law and Paul is telling them that the law can be summarized within the command to love - very much like Jesus did in His teaching.

But they are so far from that one command that they are biting and devouring one another, in danger of destroying each other. There is such animosity, such tensions within the Christian family in Galatia, that the whole thing is in danger of coming apart. And that's what usually happens in situations where the law is preferred over the grace of Jesus Christ.

I've told you the story before of the missionaries who went out on the mission field for the first time and were sent out with joy and lots of prayer and with one little request: they don't have peanut butter where we're going, so if you're sending out a gift basket or hamper of some kind, make sure to include the peanut butter. Of course, their loved ones back home did send the peanut butter and it caused a reaction among the missionaries who were already established in this place and who had done without peanut butter for some time and took it as a measure of their own godliness that they had been able to do so without complaint. The attitudes of the veteran missionaries were not full of love and grace towards the newcomers. In fact, they were full of judgment and criticism and complaint. So much so that, after just a few months in their first exciting challenge in missions, this couple returned home with broken dreams and broken hearts. "If instead of showing love among yourselves you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another."

We can't miss this - it's too important. Paul wrote an impassioned letter to a small group of newbie churches whose hearts were being broken by the cutting, devouring presence of legalism. And He said, "You have been called to live in freedom — not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love." This is the message of Paul's letter in a nutshell. You have been called out of trying to impress God through rule-keeping and into demonstrating His love and grace through the way you serve one another, the way you bless one another, the way you, for Jesus' sake, love one another.

This is the pattern we observed earlier in this chapter: people are filled with the Spirit who leads them as they are able to trust Him and He enables them to serve one another in love. This is not freedom to do whatever evil thing entices you, but the freedom from that kind of temptation and into something far better and more satisfying: loving people, for their own sake and for the building up of God's Kingdom.

I don't think you need me to give you applications for this passage today; the lessons seem obvious, don't they . . . but let me ask you to think about one person who you have seen change, in a big way, over time. Maybe that person is you. Maybe it's someone who you've become friends with or who you've met at church. You noticed some things about them when you first met them and called those things "rough around the edges", but then you noticed that those things gradually fell away - or maybe dramatically fell away.

Here's the question I want you to think about today. What happened that brought about those changes in the life of that person? Did someone sit them down and teach them the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, explaining why each was important, both then

and now? Or did they browbeat them with words that judged and condemned them, warning them about God's wrath and the coming judgment? Jesus did a little bit of that, but only with those who were self-righteous and thought they were doing a good enough job of obeying God's laws.

Or, back to this person you're thinking about. Did someone love them, encourage them, teach them and help them study God's word in a positive, caring way? Did people show hope, belief, in the person, great expectations for what lay ahead? Did that individual experience love that mattered, love that connected, love that was so obviously real that they could feel it. Because if they did, they experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit and would have been impacted for good by His presence. Let's make that a simple New Year's Resolution: that we will love people into the Kingdom of God in 2020 and beyond, showing them the freedom and joy that come from complete forgiveness and the love that comes from the Spirit of the Living God at work within us.