

“Fight for Your Freedom”

Galatians 5:13-26

When you hear the word freedom, what comes to mind? We may think about historical events like William Wilberforce’s fight to get rid of the slave trade or we may think about President Lincoln’s battle to get his Emancipation Proclamation passed or we may think about Martin Luther King and his battle for racial equality in the 1960’s. But why did they have to fight for the rights of people who were oppressed, to be free in the first place? Because of the inhumanity of mankind. Or as the Bible refers to it as our sin nature. There are those who like to yield power to force others into submission or into slavery or legalism; which is boiled down to someone’s ideas of how life should be.

The apostle Paul was fighting for freedom of a different sort in his letter to the Galatians. Paul, a Jew, was preaching the gospel that Jesus Christ was God’s Son who died on the cross for our sins and by His death made it possible for people to be free from offering sacrifices for forgiveness of sins. Yet, there was a small group of other Jews, who while claiming to believe Jesus was the Messiah, were strangely teaching a mixed message. That one had to believe in Jesus’ but still had to be circumcised and to observe the Sabbath and holidays and you still had to avoid certain meats to eat all prescribed in the Law.

In other words, they believed that one had to still be Jewish in order to be right with God. Paul adamantly said ‘No!’ That’s a form of legalism. You’re still making it sound like your works are what saved you whereas God declared through Jesus that Law keeping was not required for salvation. And up until this point in 5:13, Paul had argued persuasively that we are free from the Law. But, the Judaizers countered, that will result in people running rampant and doing whatever they want! Shouldn’t we continue to keep the Law so that we avoid licentiousness? How do we, as followers of Jesus, not abuse our freedom in Christ, as an excuse to live freely from Christ’s commands and example? We need to fight for our freedom, Paul says, on a different level. When we received Christ we received the Holy Spirit (3:2, 14), and now we have a new nature. The apostle Peter calls it our divine nature:

³His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Now we have our sinful nature dwelling alongside our divine nature. Which results in an internal conflict that we continually battle. The indwelling of the Spirit does not give us a license to sin; He opposes our sin nature. So Paul paints a black and white picture here on what each looks like so we don’t excuse our sin. He begins in v.13,

¹³You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. ¹⁴The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So being saved doesn’t mean we are free to sin nor do we have to keep the old Law. Paul says we are called to be free by God to live a different way. What way?

Follow the ‘New’ Law of Love

Jesus modelled this 'new' law of love at the Last Supper when He washed the disciples' feet. He said in John 13:34,

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

He demonstrated that love by dying on the cross for our sins, making forgiveness of sins available to us if we believe that He is God's Son who paid the necessary price to have our sins forgiven. "Love" here is the Greek Word agape, which we'll return to in v.22. It is not an emotional love but an action of serving someone else at a cost to you. This is now the new law that we as Jesus' disciples are to model. To serve others at our expense. This is actually very freeing because it frees us from ourselves. Law-keeping focuses on yourself.

How am *I* doing?
Did *I* do that right?
Am *I* looking good?

But when we follow the law of agape it's because we understand that,

Freedom through forgiveness changes our focus (vv.13-14)

This freedom from Law keeping changes the focus from us to others. Jesus modelled this for us and now we reflect Jesus by modelling it to others. And this isn't really new because it was actually in the Law. Paul quotes Lev. 19:18. Remember when a New Testament writer quotes an Old Testament verse he is referring to the entire context of that verse. Listen to how Lev. 19 begins,

The LORD said to Moses, ² "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

Then he gives a list of commandments on how not to hurt others:

⁹ "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

¹¹ "Do not steal. "Do not lie. "Do not deceive one another.

¹² "Do not swear falsely ...

¹³ "Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him.

"Do not hold back the wages ...

¹⁴ "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

¹⁵ ".... do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, ... ¹⁶ "Do not go about spreading slander among your people.

"Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD. ¹⁷ "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.

¹⁸ "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

So v.18 ends the section as a summary of all that he said from v.1 and on, which begins with 'Be holy'. Holy means set apart. Show we're set apart by the Lord and live like He wants us to. Which means serve others. Being forgiven changes our focus from self to others. And as v.15 shows

A Serving spirit results in a healthier church (v.15)

Law keeping and performance based religion becomes a comparison contest between us and others. This is why he reprimands them for biting and devouring one another, because the legalists were complaining the non-Law keepers weren't doing it right, which resulted in a divisive spirit. The best way to destroy a church is by creating division based on performance. It quickly becomes about 'us' and 'them'. Instead serve others in love. And this love is not a feeling love, it's an action. You don't serve people at your expense because you like them; you do it because it's what we're called to do. And when we obey what we're called to do, it's extremely satisfying and freeing. We're not looking for rewards or attention from God. We're doing it because we're called to do it.

How can we do that when we still struggle with sin? In vv.16-26 Paul tells us how:

Live the New Life of the Spirit **(5:16-26)**

¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Live by the Spirit, Paul says,

And watch your desires change for God (vv.16-18)

Because our old sinful nature co-exists with our new divine nature, they are diametrically opposed to one another. When we live by the Spirit our desires for God and to live His way grows while our desire for sin and self lessens. You can't just say no you won't sin, you have to replace the desire to sin with a better desire, to live by the Spirit. That word for 'live' means to conduct your life in a certain pattern.

The Spirit came into dwell in us at salvation. His purpose is to teach us the things of God by reminding us about what God has said (John 14:25). But He needs us to fill our minds with what God says so that He has something to work with. His ministry is also to convict us of sin in our life (John 16:8) but He needs our hearts to be sensitive to His leading. That's why elsewhere Paul says don't grieve the Spirit by our harsh and bitter talk against others (Eph. 4:30) nor should we quench the Spirit's fire when we doubt prophecy or question His legitimate work in people's lives (1 Thes. 5:19). If we listen to how the Spirit guides us through the Word our new divine nature is gratified and the desire for selfish sinful desires decreases.

As an illustration of what sinful desires look like Paul lists a catalog of sins in vv.19-21. He calls them the works of the flesh. When we live by the Spirit we can see how our desires change for God. But if we don't listen to the Spirit we will listen to our sinful nature and

Watch how much damage we cause (vv.19-21)

Without going into detail about each sin (which would be depressing) we can group them together for the types of sin that they are. *sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery*; are all sexual sins. We get the word 'pornography' from the Greek word for sexual immorality. Impurity refers to thoughts. Debauchery refers to our shamelessness if we continue down this road. We become so hardened to it we no longer recognize it as sin. All this affects other people in our life.

V.20 all seem to focus around selfishness and the consequences that come with. Idolatry is a form of selfishness because we choose what we want to worship. The Greek word for sorcery is the word we get Pharmacy from. Drugs and the occult are often mixed together. Again we see how these selfish sins hurt relationships. And v.21 speaks of the ills of alcohol abuse and the consequences that come from that. Paul's not saying believers don't occasionally commit these sins but he does point out that people whose life centers around these things will not enter the kingdom of God. The Spirit doesn't dwell in people who give themselves over to these sins.

In contrast to all these 'works' of the flesh (sin) Paul says the believer's life doesn't produce good works but rather the 'fruit' of the Spirit. When we live the New Life of the Spirit we

Reveal God's characteristics in ourselves (vv.22-23)

This makes sense because God is committed to conforming us into the image of His Son. His original intent for mankind was to reflect His image. So once the Spirit comes into our life, God is committed to restoring the image of Himself in us. When we live by the Spirit this is what He produces.

Unlike the catalog of individual sins, the fruit of the Spirit is actually singular. Do not think of these as 'fruits' like apples, oranges, pears, strawberries, etc. Think of this as a bunch of grapes all connected. All nine qualities are interrelated and they are all rooted in love, agape.

There are 4 Greek words for love. Eros is physical intimacy. Storge is used for family love. Phileo is used for love of friends. All these are emotional words. But agape is a word for the will. It acts for the benefit of others at your expense regardless of your feelings. It is a word that wasn't found a whole lot in everyday Greek but flourished in the New Testament. It's almost as if it's a word solely used for God's kind of love.

Fruit is not something you can just fabricate out of thin air. You must have the seed which contains the ingredients by which fruit will grow under the right conditions. The ingredients are in the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. What we need to do is provide the right conditions by which love, joy, peace, etc. will gradually grow and increase in us. That must start with agape love. The key to developing God's characteristics is to stop acting like us and start acting like God. That's a choice we need to make, not a feeling we wait for. So it begins by choosing to serve others through sacrificial actions regardless of how we feel.

When we do that we will experience God's joy. Joy is the contentment and satisfaction based on our secure foundation and future regardless of present circumstances. We know we're saved by faith. We know God has secured our future salvation because He's committed to making us more like Jesus. So we can know the joy of being content and secure in Him no matter what. Even if people reject our acts of love toward them.

'Peace' is similar to joy in that it is the contentment we have in Christ even if there are anxious moments. It's a trusting peace that surpasses human understanding which guards our hearts in difficulties. 'Patience' means to suffer long. It means to not get easily annoyed at someone or something. We get impatient because something didn't happen for us when we wanted it or how we wanted it. Impatience is selfishness.

'Kindness' and 'goodness' are Jesus like qualities where we show we genuinely care for people because God cares for them. We treat people as fellow image bearers, building them up, seeking their best interests and God's purposes for them.

'Faithfulness' refers to our willingness to hang in there. To trust God. To be reliable with people. They count on you because you show up when and where you say you will show up. What you say is truthful. You keep confidences.

'Gentleness' means we are teachable. We don't have a superior view of ourselves. Nor do we have an inferior view of ourselves. 'Self-control' is evidence that the Spirit is producing Christlike fruit in us because we are controlling our self. We are controlling our tongue because we don't always need to talk. We listen. We hold back. We measure our words and our actions before we do them.

All this shows that the Spirit is living in us and we are allowing Him to work in us. So how do we get there? V. 24

²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.*

We recognize we no longer belong to ourselves because at salvation we switched masters. We chose to put Jesus on the throne of our life and dethrone ourselves. And then we began the process of daily

Crucifying those desires to control your life (v.24)

Since we still have a sin nature we still are tempted to control our life (and sometimes other's). Every time we are tempted to play God (be in control) we need to crucify that desire, as Jesus crucified Himself to do God's will and not His own. And He did that for us. Think about what it means to crucify our desires to take control. It hurts to give up rule of our lives. It can make us feel humble (occasional humiliated?). It means to do that for a long period of time because crucifixion took days normally. It renders us powerless, and we don't like that feeling. That's what it means to crucify the flesh. And we are to do it over and over and over again; every time we are tempted to take the crown back and put it on our head.

That's the negative aspect of living the Spirit life. The positive aspect in vv.25-26 is to

Stay in step with the Spirit (vv.25-26)

²⁵ *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.* ²⁶ *Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

In these 10 verses Paul has employed three verbs with respect to our need to engage the Holy Spirit who is always dwelling in us. "Live in the Spirit", v.16 referring to our general lifestyle. To "be led by the Spirit" (v.18) referring to following His guidance, and here in v.25 if we live in the Spirit we are to "keep in step with the Spirit." That means He leads and we're to follow that lead. It's our responsibility to stay with Him. Not lag behind. Not run ahead. He's setting the pace. He's going in the right direction. He's trustworthy and won't fail us or take us somewhere that isn't good for us. Notice Paul changed pronouns here and included himself in the command to stay in step with the Spirit. Because if we don't (notice he doesn't end on that note) we will become conceited, provoking and envying one another – which was happening in the Galatian churches because of conceited legalists.

When you're conceited you think you are always right. And because you are always right every time someone challenges you there's an argument. To prove you are right you go on the offensive and always bring up your perspective. But why does this produce envy? Because deep down you are envious of those who don't agree with you. Who have peace and contentment that you don't have but you are too proud to admit it, and as a result don't exhibit the characteristics of God.

While we are called to be free from legalism, there's a spiritual battle waging inside us for control. The Spirit or our sin nature. One produces Godlike fruit, the other produces works of sin. Spiritual fruit happens when our minds are in tune with God to serve others like God; regardless of our feelings, at our expense to meet their need. I'm encouraged that Paul said 'Let us keep in step with the Spirit' inferring that he didn't always succeed. God calls us to enjoy the freedom that forgiveness of sin brings. Not a freedom to sin (which results in bondage to sin) but free to serve others because we no longer have to keep up a performance as if we're in control.

Our ability to produce the fruit of Godliness will only come when we till the soil of our minds free of sinful debris and selfish distractions so that we focus on serving others. We need to practice the crucifixion of our selfish desires every time they tempt us so we can meet the needs of each other and our community as they present themselves. Only then will we will

be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. [Eph. 4:13-14]

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net