

## ***Freedom to Love*** ***Galatians 5:13-15***

In his book *Transforming Grace* Jerry Bridges gives an illustration that really sets the context for the passage in Galatians we'll be studying this morning. He has us imagine a two-lane highway that has been built through the middle of swampland. You're fine as long as you stay on the road, but if you get careless and drive off the road you won't end up on a nice grassy shoulder; you'll end up submerged in a swamp.

The built-up road represents **grace**. As long as you are living in grace, you are fine; you'll walk with God and you'll experience life as God intends. But if you veer off the road of grace on either side you're in trouble. The swamp on one side of the road of grace represents legalism - living under the Law, having a rules-based approach to God, thinking that you merit God's favor by doing good works. That's what the book of Galatians has been warning against in the first four and a half chapters. In 5:4 Paul said that if you're seeking to be justified by the Law you've "fallen from grace": you have put yourself in a position that nullifies the grace that God offers.

But the swamp on the other side represents license. License is the mindset, "Since I'm saved by grace, I'm free to live how I want. It doesn't matter how I live my life since I'm fully accepted by God. I can sin all I want without consequence." In our passage under consideration today Paul says, in effect, that the person with that mindset has also fallen from grace. That person has also put him/herself in a position that nullifies the grace of God. That person has driven off the road of grace on the other side.

Paul's opponents in Galatia (and elsewhere) claimed that Paul's theology would ultimately lead to license. They said that if you don't have the Law you won't have any restraints and you'll end up indulging the flesh and living a very sinful life. They taught that Paul's theology was irresponsible, if not downright dangerous. Paul addresses this accusation head-on in Galatians 5. He claims several things that we'll unpack over the next three weeks. Today we're going to see in 5:13-15 that freedom from the Law doesn't mean freedom to sin; it means that we're free to love. He actually says that we are free **from** the Law in order to **fulfill** the Law.

As we consider this passage today, allow God to give you a renewed perspective on the freedom that we've been given. Since "it was for freedom that Christ set us free" we need to understand the purpose of that freedom.

***Freedom to Love (Galatians 5:13-15)*** Let's read these three verses, then we'll go back and look at the details.

13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Ultimately he wants the Galatians to understand that the foundational purpose of their freedom was love, not license. In verse 13 Paul warns against driving off the road of grace into the swamp of license (the mindset that since you're forgiven you can live however you want):

13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

The term translated "opportunity" (Gk. *aphormen*) was a military term that referred to an area for staging an assault; it was the "starting point" or "base of operations" for a more extensive campaign. Paul tells the Galatians that they shouldn't allow their freedom to become a staging area for the flesh. The flesh refers to that part of us that wants to live independent of God (NIV translates it "sinful nature"). Next week we'll have an extensive discussion of the "deeds of the flesh" - how the flesh commonly manifests itself.

Freedom from the Law was never meant to be freedom from doing the will of God. Freedom was never meant to be an excuse for lowering our ethical or behavioral standards. In Paul's mind that's like giving an invading army a staging area for conquering your country. If you think that freedom from the Law means you don't have to pay attention to how you're living your life, you're giving the flesh a staging area for taking over your entire life. Paul wants the Galatians to know in no uncertain terms that God didn't give them freedom so that their lives could be conquered and dominated by the flesh.

In reality, Paul says, we have been given freedom to love. He says, "but through love serve one another." Ironically, the term "serve" is the same term Paul uses earlier in Galatians to describe being enslaved to someone else (e.g., 4:8, 4:9, 4:25). Paul is saying that we have been given freedom so that we can willingly become slaves/servants of one another. This is how you know if a person is truly free: if a person freely loves and serves others. The person who pours out his/her life on behalf of others without any thought of being repaid - that's the person who is truly free. By contrast, the person who is stingy and who resents every ounce of time and energy expended on others - that's the person who's still in bondage.

You may be wondering why would Paul is talking about love and serving others in this context. He tells us in verse 14:

14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul is saying something very important and very profound here. He is saying that our freedom from the Law actually allows us to **fulfill** the Law; through the Spirit we can actually live out the intent of the Law, which is summed up in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Paul is making reference to Leviticus 19:18 which

said, *“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.”* We’re not free from the Law so that we can now violate the spirit and the intent of the Law; no, we’re free from the regulations of the Law so that we can now live out the intent of the Law from the heart. That’s what God promised to do in the new covenant. He said, “I will write My law on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Verse 15 suggests that the Galatians didn’t understand this. It’s been suggested (by Scot McKnight) that reading Paul’s letters is like listening to someone talking on the phone; you can’t hear the person on the other end of the line, but you can often guess what they’re saying. Paul writes:

15 But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

It sounds like the Galatians were at each others’ throats. Paul is warning that if they allow the flesh a staging area in their lives and in their fellowship, they’ll rip each other to pieces. It sounds like Paul is describing a dog fight. Paul knew from experience that church life can devolve into biting and devouring one another. Paul warns, “Watch out, take care, or you’ll consume each other.” Down in verse 20 Paul will elaborate on the deeds of the flesh by mentioning “enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions. . .” This is exactly the opposite of what their freedom was supposed to produce (i.e., love).

After four and a half chapters of warning against driving off the road of grace into the swamp of legalism, Paul warns against driving off the other side of the road into the swamp of license.

This passage suggests at least a couple of applications. The first is that ***we should cultivate a healthy fear of “the flesh.”*** For the Galatians, Paul was especially concerned about the flesh destroying their relationships within the church. Paul wanted the Galatians to have a healthy fear of the flesh so that they wouldn’t be caught unawares when the flesh tried to dominate their lives and their fellowship.

In the same way you and I need to have a healthy fear of the tendencies of ***our*** flesh. This will vary from person to person depending on your history and your personality and other factors. The point is that you need to understand and have a healthy fear of the tendencies of ***your*** flesh - how your flesh tends to manifest itself. I’m not talking about a paralyzing, obsessive fear of the flesh. We shouldn’t fix our eyes on the flesh. No, we’re supposed to fix our eyes on Jesus, knowing that His Spirit within us is stronger than the flesh. But we should still be mindful that if we give the flesh an inch, it will take a mile. That’s why I say that we should have a ***healthy*** fear of the flesh. Let me give you some examples that might stimulate your thinking.

We’ve mentioned before that the New Testament gives relatively few specific instructions on exactly how you have to seek God - both individually and corporately.

Individually, for example, the Scriptures don't demand that you get up at 5 a.m. every day, read the Bible for 30 minutes, pray for yourself for 30 minutes, pray for others for 30 minutes, etc. You don't have to fast every week. You don't have to memorize 2 Bible verses a week. You don't have to get a moleskin journal in which you write spiritual insights every day. You are given great freedom to seek God as the Spirit leads.

But you need a healthy fear of how your flesh can misuse that freedom. The flesh might say to you, "You're free from all those rules about seeking God. So don't worry if you never get around to praying or dwelling on Scripture. . . God will understand. He'll be there when you need Him." In other words, your flesh might be lazy when it comes to seeking God. You might have great energy when it comes to a dozen other things, but you get strangely slothful when it comes to seeking God. If that's the case, you need to know that about yourself.

Just because we're free from a list of rules about **how** we have to seek God doesn't mean that we no longer need to seek Him. We are still supposed to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength (Deuteronomy 6). We are still to let the Word of Christ richly dwell within us (Colossians 3:16). We are still supposed to "meditate day and night" (Psalm 1) - making God's truth the dominant thoughts in our hearts and minds. But now we are supposed to look to the Spirit - and not the Law - to guide us in these things. The flesh would just as soon we sit on the couch and watch TV instead of seeking God.

Let me give one more example. We need a healthy fear of the flesh when it comes to alcohol. Scripture - in our understanding - doesn't forbid drinking alcohol; Scripture clearly forbids drunkenness, but it doesn't forbid drinking altogether. Jesus' first miracle involved turning water into wine at a wedding. Here at Faith we don't want to go beyond Scripture and say, "Well, technically alcohol is permitted, but because alcohol has been so destructive in the lives of so many people, we think you should abstain altogether." We are very committed to not adding such regulations that go beyond the Scriptures. That would be driving off the road of grace into the swamp of legalism.

But we need to be equally committed to not driving off the other side of the road. We need a very healthy fear of how the flesh can turn the freedom to enjoy alcohol into license. A number of biblical principles apply to this issue. In 1 Corinthians 6:12, for example, Paul wrote, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." Many people are "mastered" by alcohol; that's a very common manifestation of the flesh. Or consider the last seven verses in Proverbs 23; that passage warn against drunkenness and being obsessed with getting your next drink. You need to understand yourself and whether your flesh tends toward justifying drunkenness or whether you tend to be mastered by alcohol (or anything else for that matter). We need a very healthy fear of the flesh.

The second application is that ***we should embrace the reality that freedom has a purpose (and therefore restrictions)***. It strikes me that Paul describes freedom in a

way that may not be very intuitive for us. We tend to think of freedom **from** constraints and freedom to do whatever we want. But in Galatians 5 Paul emphasized that we've been given freedom **so that** we can willingly become servants to other people. Unless you've experienced the satisfaction and the exhilaration of serving others from the heart, hearing this might be a disappointment to you. You might think, "What kind of freedom is **that**?"

Timothy Keller has a rather insightful discussion of freedom in his book *The Reason for God*. He points out that many people think Christianity is a straightjacket that restricts you and limits the way you live your life. Addressing that mindset, Keller writes this:

In many areas of life, freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions. Those that fit with the reality of our nature and the world produce greater power and scope for our abilities and a deeper joy and fulfillment. (p. 47)

He points out that a fish, for example, is free "only if it is restricted and limited to water." You can put a fish out on the grass and say, "You're free!" but such "freedom" violates the reality that a fish absorbs oxygen from water, not air.

You and I need to embrace the "liberating restrictions" that God has placed upon us. The command, "Love one another" isn't a demand that will squeeze the life out of us. Since God is love, if you are a son/daughter of God you will never be more free than when you are loving other people. We aren't free to treat people however we want; we are free to love. Remember that love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous, and love does not take into account a wrong suffered. When you love like that you are like your Father in heaven. And **nobody is more free than God**. If we want to enjoy the freedom Christ has given us, ***we need to embrace the reality that our freedom has a purpose.***

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, allow God to search your heart and mind in this area of freedom. Perhaps as I've been speaking, God has brought to mind ways in which you've given the flesh an base of operation in your life. Next week we'll see that the flesh manifests itself in many different ways. Perhaps you've left the road of grace and you're mired in the swamp of license in some area of your life. The Lord's Table reminds us that Jesus dies on the cross to pay for those very sins. His body was broken for the very sins that God has brought to your mind; His blood was shed to redeem you from those very sins. Experience a fresh cleansing and a fresh start this morning through the Lord's Table.

As well, allow God to impress upon you the beauty and the rightness of being set free in order to become a servant and to love. Maybe you don't really "buy" that reality yet. Admit that to God and allow Him to change your heart and mind. Perhaps someone comes to mind whom you're having a hard time loving. Embrace the reality that because Jesus died and rose again you are free to love that person.