

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LICENSE PART 1

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:13-24

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

In 5:1, Paul exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in their freedom. Then, in vv. 2-24, he immediately warns the Galatians of two dangerous threats to their life of freedom: legalism (vv. 2-12) and license (vv. 13-24). As believers, we are continually faced with the constant threats of *diminishing* the law (legalism) or *dismissing* the law (license).

In vv. 2-12, we have examined how Paul warned us against the threat of legalism. Now, in vv. 13-24, he will warn us against the threat of license.

Freedom sums up the Christian's state before God as well as in this world. Freedom is the basic theological concept that underlies Paul's argument throughout this letter (cf. Betz, *Galatians*, p. 255). Paul has carefully defended and commended the believer's freedom in Christ. In chapter 3, he argues that a Christian is totally free from the Mosaic Law and its precepts (see 3:15-4:11 where Paul emphasizes the salvation-historical aspects of promise and law).

Because of this emphasis on freedom, Paul's opponents accused the apostle to the Gentiles of preaching lawlessness (antinomianism, "against the law"). However, Paul demonstrates that freedom from the Law as a way *for* life does not mean freedom from the obligation of moral conduct. Ironically, Paul argues it is his legalistic opponents—Judaizers—who are the consummate antinomian (most guilty of license, cf. 2:17-21). The legalist is really the one who fails to fulfill the true purpose of the OT law (cf. Gal. 5:14; Lev. 19:18). The legalist erects his own "laws" (standards of righteousness) and thus dismisses and neglects God's law.

Paul argues in this section (5:13-24) that fulfillment of the law is fostered not by the commands of the law but by the gracious action of the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit, working through the gospel, can empower obedience. As has been pointed out previously, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is crucial to Paul's theology of Christian ethics (i.e., life of Christian freedom).

It is vital to understand that when "antinomian" (against law) objections were raised against Paul's teaching on Christian freedom, Paul didn't respond by introducing a "new law" but rather points to the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16ff.). There is always the temptation—which Paul certainly faced—of thinking that license can be held in check by a heavy dose of law. But, amazingly, Paul disagrees. F.F. Bruce writes, "...the principle of law was so completely opposed to spiritual freedom that it could never be enlisted in defence of that freedom: nothing was more certainly calculated to kill true freedom. The freedom of the Spirit was the

antidote alike to legal bondage and unrestrained licence” (*Galatians*, p. 240). Standing firm in one’s freedom (fulfillment of the law’s demands) is the result of the internal drive and compulsion of the Holy Spirit who works through the means of the gospel rather than by imposed external demands of law. Only the Spirit can create internally what the law demands externally! Martin Luther pamphlet, *The Freedom of a Christian*, writes, “...the promises of God give what the commandments of God demand and fulfill what the law prescribes so that all things may be God’s alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments” (p. 12).

Having thoroughly taught and defended the Christian’s freedom, Paul recognizes the fact this freedom can be abused. He anticipates a possible overreaction by believers to his teaching on Christian Freedom (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 330). If not properly understood, Christian freedom could be turned into an excuse (occasion-ἄφορμῆν) for license (i.e, indulging the selfish desires of the flesh instead of serving one another in love).

In vv. 13-24, Paul argues that Christian freedom does not mean freedom from all moral obligations. Yes, Christians are free from the Law of Moses but this does not mean they are free to live as they please. Rather, Christian Freedom (i.e., life in the Spirit) expresses itself in loving service to others—which is the fulfillment of the Law—rather than selfishly indulging the flesh.

Life under the law leads to a life of sin (license) because the law does not eradicate sin but rather increases it (cf. v. 18). Therefore, the solution to license and moral disorder is not life lived under the Law but rather life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such a life consists in loving service, which is the fulfillment of the spirit and intent of the Law.

Therefore, to guard believers against misunderstanding Christian freedom and thereby falling prey to the threat of license, Paul first defines the nature of Christian of freedom in vv. 13-15. He gives three specific characteristics of Christian freedom.

LESSON:

I. PAUL DEFINES THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM. VV. 13-15

A. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM ISN’T A LICENSE TO INDULGE IN THE FLESH. V. 13A

In v. 13, Paul begins by restating from v. 1 the purpose for which God calls us, “For you were called to freedom...” The difference in v. 13 from v. 1 is this: In v. 1, freedom is the safeguard against the threat of legalism and now in v. 13, freedom is the safeguard against the threat of license.

Paul cautions by way of exhortation that if freedom is not understood properly it can become an “opportunity for the flesh” (v. 13, cf. v. 21 “I warned you before...”). To be sure, Christian freedom and grace can be abused. In Jude 4, Jude reveals that

this was already happening in the 1st century church. Jude says false teachers had infiltrated the church who “pervert” (lit. “change”) God’s grace (i.e., they change grace into a license for sensuality, abandonment to immoral behavior, usually sexual sin; Note: Peter uses the same word translated “sensuality” (ἀσέλγεια) in 2 Peter 2:7 to describe the sexually immoral excess of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen. 19; Gal. 5:19). By changing God’s grace into an excuse for ungodly living, Jude says these false teachers deny the Lord. To use then one’s freedom as an occasion (excuse) for license is to deny the Lord, who came to bring us freedom *from* sin rather than freedom *to* sin.

The word “opportunity” was used as “a base or circumstance from which other action becomes possible, such as the starting-point or base of operations for an expedition” (“ἀφορμή,” BDAG, 158.). “Flesh” (σάρξ) refers to one’s sinful nature, the old fallen self “in Adam” that desires (cf. vv. 16-17) to do its own will and satisfy its own selfish cravings—to follow self-will as opposed to God’s will (i.e., law). Paul’s concern is to keep freedom from being abused and becoming a base of operations for indulging in the selfish desires of one’s flesh. He wants to prevent the desires of the flesh from dominating and producing the “works of the flesh” (cf. vv. 19-21).

Paul is clear that freedom is never meant to be an excuse for indulging the flesh (i.e., self-will) freely and without consequence. It is important to remember that believers—though justified—are not entirely free from sin (see Canons of Dort, Perseverance of the Saints, for a concise helpful explanation). Thus, indulging in the flesh is always a possibility. While a true believer can fall into sin—even grievous sin for a time (as evidenced by David and Peter), he cannot and will not totally abandon himself to a life of unrestrained license. True believers will not use freedom as an occasion to freely indulge in their flesh and enjoy sin without consequence.

The reason believer’s will not live a life of unrestrained license is because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 3:14, Paul says that when a man is justified he also receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. In salvation, the gospel brings a double blessing. Believers not only receive forgiveness of sins, but also the living, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and thus power for holiness. In Galatians 5:13-6:10, Paul explains what it means to live out one’s freedom in the power of the Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit not only regenerates us but He also sets us free from the reign and slavery of sin. The Holy Spirit will not allow the believer to use freedom as a license for sin—to justify the indulgence of his/her flesh indefinitely. He will always bring about conviction and repentance.

So, Paul first states that the Christian’s freedom isn’t a license to indulge the flesh—an occasion to satisfy one’s selfish desires. Rather, Christian freedom manifests itself in serving and loving others, which is a fulfillment of the law. This leads us to a second characteristic of the nature of Christian freedom.

B. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM FULFILLS THE LAW RATHER THAN DISMISSES IT. VV. 13B-14.

“For” (γὰρ) indicates the basis of v. 13, namely Christian freedom expresses itself in loving service to others, which Paul states fulfills the demands—the spirit and intention—of the Law (v. 14). Far from dismissing the law, the gospel of Christian freedom fulfills the Law.

What then does a life of Christian freedom look like? In other words, what does it look like to fulfill the law? In v. 13, Paul says that Christian freedom leads us to “become slaves of one another through love” (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 333). The verb Paul uses (δουλεύετε) means “to serve as a slave” or “to act or conduct oneself as one in total service to another, perform the duties of a slave” (*BDAG*, 259).

This is an amazing statement! How ironic it is that Paul says we are freed from the bondage of slavery to the Law in order to fulfill the Law and thereby become slaves to others! In the Freedom of a Christian, Martin Luther sets forth two propositions concerning Christian freedom. He writes, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, and subject to all” (p. 7). True freedom manifests itself as slavery (δουλεύετε)—serving one another in love!

Those who fulfill the law look for opportunities to love their neighbor rather than indulge their own selfish desires and self-will. Tom Schreiner observes, “Freedom suggests to human beings an open door to fulfill natural desires, but subjection to such desires is not freedom but slavery. True freedom liberates believers from their selfish will so that they find joy in serving others. Freedom manifests itself as love, as a desire to fulfill the needs of others” (*Galatians*, p. 334).

Loving our neighbor by serving them is why we are justified and adopted (Gal. 3-4). The ethical consequences of the gospel are “others focused” rather than “self-focused.” No amount of external, codified law could ever bring about such a selfless life of loving service to others! We have been declared righteous (2:14), adopted as sons and given the gift of the Holy Spirit (4:1-7) not to live for and love ourselves but to love and serve others (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14-15).

Jesus, the perfect Servant, said, “...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). And so as the perfect Servant, Jesus fulfilled the law for us and thus made it possible for us to fulfill it through faith in Him. Christian freedom, then, manifests itself in loving service whereas legal bondage manifests itself in selfish indulgence (license). Simply put, we have been liberated to love (i.e., to fulfill the law)!

In v. 14, Paul says that Christian freedom cannot be a license for sin—an opportunity for the flesh/self-will—because it leads to the fulfillment of the spirit and intention of the whole (πᾶς) Law.

It is important to understand that the fulfillment of the law, of which Paul speaks, is a fulfillment of the promise of the new covenant prophecies of Jeremiah 31:31-34

and Ezekiel 36:26-27 concerning the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel prophesies, “²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Fulfillment of the law is the consequence of justification and the result of the Holy Spirit’s work (cf. Gal. 3:14; 5:22-23). In v. 14, Paul quotes Leviticus 19:18, which refers to the Second Table of the Law:

“honor your father and mother” (Ex. 20:12);
“you shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13);
“you shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14);
“you shall not steal” (Ex. 20:15);
“you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16);
“you shall not covet” (Ex. 20:17).

These 6 commandments are illustrations of what it looks like to love your neighbor. Paul says this in Romans 13:8-10,

“⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Let’s take for example the 5th Commandment, “honor your father and mother.” What does it look like to fulfill this commandment? What is the spirit and intent of this command?

Listen to how the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism explain the 5th commandment,

“Q. What does God require in the fifth commandment? A. That I show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline, and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings, since it is God's will to govern us by their hand.”

What about the 7th Commandment, “you shall not commit adultery?” What does it look like to fulfill the 7th Commandment? Again, the Heidelberg Catechism provides a helpful answer,

“108. Q. What does the seventh commandment teach us? A. That all unchastity (not virtuous/impurity) is cursed by God. We must therefore

detest it from the heart and live chaste and disciplined lives, both within and outside of holy marriage. 109. Q. Does God in this commandment forbid nothing more than adultery and similar shameful sins? A. Since we, body and soul, are temples of the Holy Spirit, it is God's will that we keep ourselves pure and holy. Therefore He forbids all unchaste acts, gestures, words, thoughts, desires, and whatever may entice us to unchastity.”

Paul references the breaking of the 7th Commandment in 5:19 where he lists the works of the flesh (see also 1 Thessalonians 4:3 when he writes, “For this is the will of God (God’s requirement in His law), your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality (all forms of impurity and unchastity).

Fulfilling the 5th and 7th Commandments are illustrations of what it looks like to love one’s neighbor. Such a loving life is the fruit of a gospel-driven, Spirit-indwelt life that has been freed from the slavish bondage of legalism! All who are free from the law as a covenant for life will begin to live according to the law a guide of life. The reason is because of the indwelling and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will enable a true believer to begin to live a life of love (obedience to the law), albeit not perfectly.

Again, the Heidelberg Catechism is helpful here in dispelling any notion of license while at the same time guarding against an unbiblical view of perfection in this life (thus protecting failing believers from falling into despair over their struggles with the flesh, cf. 5:17). After its exposition of the 10 Commandments, Q. 114 in the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly? A. No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.”

Simply put, the gospel doesn’t create in us a heart that picks and chooses which commandments we will obey and which one’s we will dismiss (i.e., create license). Rather, the gospel creates in us a desire to love and fulfill all that God requires of us (cf. 5:14, “the whole Law is fulfilled...”). And so like the Psalmist in Psalm 119:12-16, we delight in God’s law as the perfect guide of life and say, “¹² Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! ¹³ With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. ¹⁴ In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.”

It is interesting to note that Paul doesn’t mention the first table of the law (first 4 commandments to love God. The reason is because the context of Galatians 5:13-6:10 has to do with social relationships within the Galatian church. Love for God (obedience to the first table of the law) is assumed here because love for God manifests itself in love for others (obedience to the second table). Love for our neighbor proves love for God to be real. Calvin writes,

“God...is invisible; but He represents Himself to us in the brethren, and in their persons demands what is due to Himself. Love to men springs only from the fear and love of God; and therefore we need not wonder if, by a figure of speech, in which a part is taken for the whole, the effect includes under it the cause of which it is the sign. But it would be wrong in any person to attempt to separate our love of God from our love of men” (*Galatians*, p. 160).

The apostle John in 1 John 4:20-21 writes, “²⁰ If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” Thus, Paul argues that true freedom manifests itself in love toward others. Such love is evidenced by the ability of believers to get along with one another. This leads to Paul’s third characteristic on the nature of Christian freedom.

C. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM DOESN’T DESTROY BUT RATHER BUILDS THE CHURCH. V. 15

Paul warns in graphic language, “if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”

Verse 14 is the negative side of v. 13. Verse 14 details what happens when believers do not love and serve one another (when they fail to fulfill the law). Negatively, Paul says Christian freedom is not a license to engage in harsh criticism and hateful, destructive speech toward others. This internal strife of dissension and squabbling seems to be one of the chief sins that plagued the Galatian church. Some commentators suggest that the strife was provoked by the theological controversy that had infiltrated the church (see Calvin, *Galatians*, p. 161).

It is important to note that hateful speech is not only hurtful but also destructive. Paul graphically describes the internal conflict and strife, which characterized the Galatian churches. He compares it as being like a pack of wild animals preying on one another (“if you bite and devour one another”). The flesh reduces man to the level of a brute beast that is bent on tearing apart his prey! Therefore, Paul exhorts the Galatians (and us) to “watch out” (βλέπετε) because if left unchecked, such internal strife would lead to the complete destruction of the church (“watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”). The word “consume” (ἀναλωθήτε) used here by Paul is the same word that James and John used when they asked Jesus, “...Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them” (Lk. 9:54)?

Calvin writes, “I wish we could always remember, when the devil tempts us to disputes, that the disagreement of members within the church can lead to nothing else than the ruin and consumption of the whole body. How distressing, how mad is it, that we, who are members of the same body, should be leagued together, of our own accord, for mutual destruction” (*Galatians*, p. 162).

A licentious heart is an unloving heart that is utterly destructive to the church. Do you know what Paul is showing us in v. 15? Biting and devouring others with destructive speech is an illustration of what it looks like to break the 9th Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Again the Heidelberg Catechism’s exposition of the 9th Commandment is helpful. Q. 112 asks, “What is required in the ninth commandment? A. I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard. Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath. In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth, speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation.”

The breaking of the 9th Commandment—which is a work of the flesh—comes from the self-centered desires of the flesh and it results in tearing apart the church—destroying relationships. Such unloving infighting is the product of selfishness, self-seeking, self-love, self-will (i.e., the flesh). When licentious hearts dismiss God’s law they hurt and destroy the unity of God’s people. *License consumes whereas love protects and builds.*

The one who loves (i.e., fulfills the law) will not injure, harm or destroy any man. Quarrels, destructive, judgmental speech and internal strife are the total antithesis of love, which flows from a gospel-saturated, Spirit-indwelt heart. It is important to note that Paul rules out self-love as the basis for loving others. In fact, self-love is the problem! Calvin observes,

“...we shall never love our neighbours with sincerity, according to our Lord’s intention, till we have corrected the love of ourselves. The two affections are opposite and contradictory; for the love of ourselves leads us to neglect and despise others,—produces cruelty, covetousness, violence, deceit, and all kindred vices,—drives us to impatience, and arms us with the desire of revenge” (*Galatians*, p. 161).

The flesh destroys whereas as the Spirit builds up. In contrast to the flesh, Christian freedom—which is manifest in loving service—promotes the health and wellbeing of the church. Genuine Christian Freedom fosters unity, oneness and creates an atmosphere of grace and forgiveness, longsuffering and patience toward one another.

REFLECTION:

The challenge before us from this text is quite clear. How do we come to the place where our lives are characterized as serving one another in love (i.e., true Christian freedom)? How do we find joy in serving others rather than ourselves? Where does the desire to fulfill the needs of others come from? This text challenges us to begin

asking the question in our marriages, places of employment, the church, etc..., “How can I serve you? What can I do to help meet your needs?”

The answer to all of these questions is the gospel! If we are to live in freedom and not allow our freedom to be turned into an occasion for license (thus fulfilling the intent and spirit of the law to love our neighbor), we must be self-consciously and acutely aware of God’s love for us. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because He first loved us.” We could say, “We serve because He first served us.” We seek to meet the needs of others because God in Christ came first to meet our greatest need. The Holy Spirit, through the gospel (2 Cor. 3:8; Rom. 5:5), pours out God’s love into our hearts. As we daily, moment-by-moment reflect upon the gospel—which is the ministry of the Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit will flood our hearts with a sense/taste of God’s love and favor for us. We will then in turn be driven/compelled to fulfill the law (i.e., to love God and our neighbor; cf. Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 5:14-15).

You see legalism will burn you out. License will rot you out. But, a gospel-driven life will fill you out, then pour you out, for the good of others and the Savior's glory.

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