

Galatians 5: From Law to Liberty

In this chapter, Paul begins to close his letter to the church in Galatia. He's previously established credibility, defended the gospel, preached ardently about the distinctions between the old and new law, and now he provides the reader with some personal application. Our modern-day studies and sermons often follow this very same structure: introduction, body of teaching, then application. Paul wishes to make these points stick in their minds, and he does so by inviting internal reflection and giving practical examples for living the Christian life.

LOVE, LIBERTY, & THE LAW (vv. 1-15)

Having concluded chapter 4 with the contrasting illustration of Hagar (bondwoman) and Sarah (freewoman), Paul wastes no time diving into what this teaching means for Christians today. In verse 1, he calls for us to stand fast in the freedom of Christ, being vigilant to stay away from the former state of bondage under the old law. This point circles back to his teaching in Galatians 1:6-10.

- To what were the Galatian Christians turning away (Galatians 1:6)?
- Read John 8:31-32. How does the truth make us free? Relate this point to the freedom of Galatians 5:1.

Paul goes on in verses 2-6 to mention the difficulty of turning back to circumcision. We looked at this concept in great detail in Galatians 2: Paul was tasked to preach to the Gentiles (the uncircumcised), and, as a result, prejudicial tension arose among those Jews who had not separated themselves from the old law. In Galatians 5, Paul writes that Christ profits nothing to the one who goes back to those old ways. We cannot live under both the old and new covenants. If a person is to adhere to the law of circumcision in the Christian Age, Paul says he must then adhere to the law in its entirety (v. 3).

- What problems arise for believers today who subscribe to the law of Moses rather than the law of Christ?
- Read Romans 3:9-20. What knowledge is brought forth by the old law?

Just like the Christians in Galatia, we need Christ. His sacrifice was made for *us* that we might have abundant life (John 10:10). If we seek salvation from the old law, we will not find it, for blessings flow only through Christ (Ephesians 1:3). Paul goes so far as to say that to return to the law is to "become estranged from Christ" (Galatians 5:4). The King James Version renders this phrase, "Christ is become of no effect unto you." As Romans 3 teaches, no one has

been able to keep the law of Moses perfectly, thereby necessitating the better Way found in Jesus.

Galatians 5:6

*“For in _____ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails _____,
but _____ working through _____.”*

Continuing on in vv. 7-15, Paul’s words call for introspection. To paraphrase in modern vernacular, the apostle is saying, “You were doing so well. What happened?” That sort of question always cuts right to the heart of a matter, especially when asked by someone for whom we deeply care. Paul is that very someone to these Christians; he first preached the gospel to them during his missionary journeys (Acts 16:6) and likely had a working relationship with this congregation, given the nature of his letter.

The true gospel preached by Paul to the Galatians is from God (Galatians 1:6). In contrast, the false doctrine that has been troubling these brethren “does not come from Him who calls [them]” (Galatians 5:8). Paul notes that judgment will come upon this wolf in sheep’s clothing, for he has meddled with the Lord’s law. Peter writes of the difficult deception inherent in false teachers’ practices.

- Read 2 Peter 2:19-21. How does a false teacher bring about bondage to those who have been freed?
- Why is it better not to have known the Lord’s law than to walk away from the truth after obtaining knowledge of it?

Revelation 22:18-19 describes the great destruction awaiting those who add to or take away from the word of God. False teaching is dangerous stuff! Nevertheless, Paul trusts that the Galatians will be able to overcome their current difficulties (Galatians 5:10).

Verses 11-12 suggest a sarcastic fix to the whole dilemma. If Paul and the churches in Galatia were to stop preaching Christ and return to preaching circumcision, these false teachers would be satisfied; however, doing so would require one to disregard the scene at Calvary completely. The cross of Christ’s crucifixion is where the imaginary line exists, showing the old covenant’s ending and the new covenant’s beginning. Colossians 2:14-15 illustrates this idea by speaking of the “handwriting of requirements that was against us...”

“...He has taken it out of the way, having _____.”

Of course, Paul would never submit to this return to the old law. In a wordplay symbolic of the removal of skin required in circumcision, he wishes, rather, that these false teachers would “cut themselves off” or remove themselves from the fellowship of the churches in Galatia (v. 12).

Finally, Paul gets to love and liberty. This liberty is not in the worldly vein of “live as you like”; rather, it is the liberty that is found in Christ, being freed from the bondage of the law. Bennie Cryer puts it well in his commentary on Galatians 5:13:

“[Liberty] does not mean they are free to do what they want to anywhere, anytime. It means they are free to act within the boundaries of the new covenant. A child of free parents has liberty that a slave child does not have, but even that child has to live by the rules of the family” (Galatians 127).

Liberty is never to be used as an opportunity to indulge the flesh. Instead, it is fulfilled in serving and loving our neighbors (vv. 13-14). If Paul is indicating that this is a struggle for the Galatians (v. 15), this admonition will go a long way to prepare their hearts for the final section of this chapter.

WALKING IN THE SPIRIT (vv. 16-26)

How will the Galatian brethren excel in Paul’s challenge to hold fast to the liberty found in Christ? They will do so by choosing faithfulness over fleshly lusts. Though sinful living seems far more pervasive in modern societies, people in Bible times struggled just as much to find spiritual balance and to conquer temptations in daily living. Paul acknowledges that the Spirit and the flesh are contrary to one another, “so that you do not do the things that you wish” (v. 17). These desires stem from within; and if not properly handled, they can give birth to sin (James 1:14-15).

One might believe that these desires disappear upon baptism into Christ; but as is the case with the Galatians, it is clear that the sin problem still exists, even in the midst of God’s people. Some will posit this war between flesh and Spirit as a case for hereditary depravity: the idea that man is born without the innate desire to do good in this fallen world. Though temptation presents a difficult challenge for all people, God expects His followers to come out from that darkness and walk in the obedience of faith. If we were all depraved, the biblical teachings of righteous living and growing in the fruit of the Spirit would serve no purpose. Paul moves forward with this contrast in mind (v. 18). We are free from the law, now to be led by the Spirit. This verb implies a submission that is necessary if we are to be God’s people. Romans 8:14 describes this sentiment further:

“For as many as are led by the _____, these are _____.”

To close this chapter, Paul continues this theme of contrast by giving two opposing lists: the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. One who practices the former “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 21). As previously mentioned, all of these sins find their inception in the

mind. When the desires of the flesh are given priority in thought, they become much more than mere wisps of one’s will. Complete the following table using Galatians 5:19-21.

The Works of the Flesh

Adultery			

Can any of these sins be grouped together? What similarities or differences are evident? Perhaps some are more inwardly or outwardly expressed; some are falsely deemed “more evil” in our minds. We must remember that sin is all the same to God. “[He] is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). If we are to conform to God’s standard of holiness, we must put these things aside.

Now, complete the following table using Galatians 5:22-23.

The Fruit of the Spirit

Love		

Notice the great contrast between this God-given fruit and the desires of the world (which do *not* come from God, e.g. 1 John 2:15-17). Paul writes that each of these attributes of the Spirit are never prohibited by law, either of the Lord or of local government. Further, these are basic standards of moral law; that is, ethics that are naturally evident and valued in the created world—what we call “right” and “wrong.” Of course, for the Christian, moral law is first delivered through the word of God. For those who do not believe, this moral law’s origin provides quite the predicament.

Paul admonishes the Christians in Galatia to be true to Christ in crucifying the flesh “with its passions and desires” (v. 24). Many of the fires produced by the works of the flesh can be extinguished by the fruit of the Spirit. Struggling with sexual sin? Work on faithfulness and self-control. Overcome by wrath and hatred? Try some peace and longsuffering. The solution to the

problem of sin can be found only in Christ. We would do well to strive endlessly in cultivating a spiritual orchard with the fruit of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

God's people are free from the law of Moses, now enjoying the perfect law of liberty in Christ. Paul spends so much of his letter to the Galatians explaining the intricate distinctions between the old and new covenants, and the recurring theme shines with each occurrence: Do not go back! In Galatians 5, Paul has again shown the impossibility of mingling the two covenants and their teachings. Through introspection and personal application, he gives practical solutions to this problem of looking back. Christians are to fulfill the law of liberty in love and daily walk in the fruit of the Spirit.

Discussion Questions

- How can I hold myself accountable against false teachers who might seek to "leaven" the local "lump"?
- In what instances have I used my freedom in Christ to show love to my neighbor?
- Which works of the flesh or fruit of the Spirit do I need to eradicate/cultivate in my life and how will I do so?