

MADE FREE TO LIVE

A HOLY LIFE



Galatians 5:13-18

This Study Paper contains the following :-

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Introduction to the passage

There is a danger with what Paul has been setting out at the beginning of chapter 5. Christ has set his people free. This can be and has been completely misunderstood. A reaction of the human mind to freedom is, “I can do what I like”; there is no restriction, all the barriers are taken away. The result of such an attitude is lawlessness and anarchy. The theological word for this is antinomianism.¹ Is this what Paul has been setting out? No, Paul knows very well how what he has been teaching could be so easily twisted and incorrectly interpreted. So, in opening the last part of the letter in 5:13, Paul warns the Galatians about misapplying this freedom. They are not to indulge in the old, sinful nature, but instead they are to pursue a life serving one another in love. This is easier said than done, so Paul makes it clear that the Christian life is a continual battle between the Spirit who indwells the believer and the believer’s old sinful nature. There is no teaching in the New Testament to suggest that holiness comes to the believer in one spiritual experience or by some automatic gift from God. Instead, the New Testament continually urges believers to fight, run, work, resist, put off and put on, mortify, etc. The Christian life is a continual battle.

¹ Antinomianism - anti (against) nomos (law)

What these verses mean

Verse 13

You, my brothers,

Paul explains again why the false teaching about salvation’s being earned by observing ceremonies is so wrong. The sentence begins (in Greek) with the word “for”, which expresses the reason for what has been previously said. At this point Paul ends his theological argument and begins to write about practical Christian living.

were called to be free.

Until now Paul has been proving that salvation cannot be earned by slavishly keeping any laws. Instead, salvation must be received from Christ who has perfectly fulfilled the law on behalf of all who trust in him. They are now freed from the burden of trying to keep the law for their own salvation. See note on 5:1 (Study 21, page 186 of this Study Book). They must also be free from immoral habits.

But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature;

The “sinful nature” (“the flesh” is in the original Greek and in some other translations) means not the physical nature but the sinful nature that is in us all. See verses 19, 20. Freedom from the law does not mean that believers can be immoral. Believers have come out from the control of a mere system of legal requirements and are now under the control of a person – God the Holy Spirit (verse 16). They must, therefore live holy lives. And to have the Holy Spirit guiding us from within is better than merely relying on a law that is outside of us – compare Jeremiah 31:31-34.

rather, serve one another in love.

Paul here develops in more detail what he had begun to say in 5:6. True belief must produce a life of good works. The word “serve” is related to the Greek word “slave”. Believers are not to be slaves of any law, nor of any sinful habit, but they are to be slaves of Christ (see 1:10) and of each other. The freedom the believer receives from Christ is not a freedom to be independent of other believers.

Verse 14

The entire law is summed up in a single command:

See Romans 13:10. The true intention behind the ten commandments is fulfilled by the believer who is controlled by the Holy Spirit, who fills him with love (Rom. 5:5).

“Love your neighbour as yourself.”

The consequence of being free in Christ is that there is a distinct lifestyle which is set apart from the rest of the world. This lifestyle is governed

by a single command, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” This is a quote from Leviticus 19:18, from the laws given to Moses, the very thing Paul has been arguing that the Galatians should not rely upon for their salvation. Here is the important thing that Paul has been getting at, the law prescribes love but cannot produce it. The rules tell us we should love, but we cannot keep to the rules, we break them. But through faith in Christ a person is able to put this love into practice. The key to this is the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit living in us

Verse 15

If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Perhaps the introduction of the false teaching into the Galatian church had been the cause of many quarrels and arguments. The words “bite” and “devour” and “destroyed” are the common Greek words which describe animals fighting among themselves. Paul means not that Christians can destroy each other’s salvation, but that arguments which produce hatred will destroy Christian fellowship. Differences of opinion among believers must be resolved by loving discussion to discover the truth of God’s Word on the matter and never by bitter or angry confrontation.

Verse 16

So I say, live by the Spirit,

“Spirit” here means the Holy Spirit: it cannot mean our personal souls. The human spirit is not itself antagonistic to our human nature. Our souls are part of our human nature, here called “the sinful nature” (flesh), against which the Spirit fights (5:17). “Spirit” therefore cannot be part of our human nature but must be something different: i.e. the Holy Spirit. To live by the Spirit means to behave in such a way as to please the Holy Spirit who is a person and therefore capable of being pleased or grieved. Believers are to behave as the Spirit would behave. The emphasis here is more on the Spirit as being the source of our spiritual strength. (He is both, of course.) The old law does not set the standards for the believer, but neither is lawlessness the standard for the believer. The indwelling Spirit now leads the believer to Christ as the standard to be followed.

and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

The phrase is very emphatic. Whoever lives in the presence of the Holy Spirit can never at the same time be a slave to sinful human nature. This is an infallible test of the true condition of a believer. If spirituality does not hinder the habits of carnality it cannot be a real spirituality. This includes sexual sins but also much more. See the list of 17 words in verses 19-21. “The flesh of no faithful man is so good, but, being offend-

ed, he will not bite or devour, or at least omit somewhat of the commandment to love” – Martin Luther.

No believer has so completely conquered the old nature that he never bites or devours or fails to love. Until our death our flesh will trouble us.

Note: It is important to realise that “sinful nature” here does not mean our physical bodies. It means our whole human nature, spoiled by sin. Paul is not suggesting that believers are to ill-treat their bodies in order to become spiritual persons. Fasting, self-flagellation, penances and living in solitude do not make the soul holy. “My face was pale with fasting, but my mind was inflamed with desires in my cold body; my flesh was half dead, yet the flames of fleshly lust burned within me” - these are the words of Jerome, an early church leader (345-419) who tried living as an ascetic. What Paul is saying is that if we are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit we will be spiritual. The way to prevent weeds growing is to fill the plot with good crops.

Verse 17

For the sinful nature desires

Compare Romans 7:15,16. Paul makes it clear that by himself the believer cannot succeed in living the Christian life. This does not mean that the Christian life is an experience of continuous defeat. Believers are not left to themselves; they have the Spirit in addition to themselves (5:18)!

what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature.

This war between the Spirit of God and sinful human nature began in Genesis 3:15. After Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit poured out on all believers (4:6), the conflict now takes place within each believer’s own experience. There can never be peace between these two forces; nor can they live permanently together. There will come a time when at death the Spirit will be finally victorious as he has promised. Meanwhile, up to the point of death, the struggle continues in the believer; only death can end it. That is why believers can see in death one great blessing (1 Co. 15:54-57).

They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

Whilst we are on this earth there is a conflict between the new creation and the old nature. The old nature includes our body, mind, feelings and emotions. Within all this we must recognise that God has given our bodies natural appetites; they are neutral and can be used for holy or

sinful purposes. These must not be confused with sinful desires. The old nature is still present and battles with the new creation. If we were to resist the desires of the old nature through our own will-power, i.e. by following a set of rules, we would fail. We have failed to keep God's rules, his laws. The tendency of the old nature is to rebel and disobey; if a rule tells us not to do something, then the old nature will stir within us to do it. Paul brings this out in Romans 7:21. All believers experience this conflict. This conflict will not diminish as a person gets older and matures in the Christian faith. If anything, the battle can intensify. There are some who maintain that a Christian can attain sinless perfection on this earth – it is a delusion.

Verse 18

But if you are led by the Spirit,

The verb is in a form which means that the action is continuous: i.e. continually led; it is not one, or even several, separate instances of Spirit-guidance that is being spoken of. Paul means a life continually under the direction of the Spirit. This kind of life is one in which the continual influence of the Holy Spirit causes the believer to seek to avoid all known sin and to make use of every biblical means possible to improve the holiness of his life. See Philippians 2:12,13.

you are not under law.

To be “under law” means to be judged by the law as the standard we must reach to earn our salvation. Because we fail to do this, we are condemned sinners. To be under the influence of the Spirit, however, must mean that we are now among those for whom Christ has obtained salvation by his perfect law-keeping. The Spirit is only given to believers. They are liberated from the rule of the law (5:1).

“that He might come to have FIRST PLACE” . . . Col.1:18

The Holy Spirit is a gift to all believers promised by
The gift was purchased by the perfect life and work of . . .
The Holy Spirit was poured out by the glorified . . .
The Spirit now delights to find ways to glorify . . .
The Spirit continues on earth the ministry begun by . . .
The Spirit leads believers to become like . . .
The Spirit helps believers to pray in the name of . . .

See Acts 1:4,5; Acts 2:33; John 7:39; John 16:14; Acts 1,2; Romans 8:9, 26.

To think about:-

To be filled with the Spirit is to be under the lordship of Christ.



Summary

At the beginning of the letter Paul was quick to condemn false teaching, which claimed to be the gospel but was not the gospel at all (1:6-7). The true gospel is the good news that salvation is given through believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and his death on the cross. False teaching advocates a person's having to do something to please God and through good works to gain salvation. In the case of the Judaisers, the ones who had come amongst the Galatian believers, their teaching was that faith alone was insufficient; something else was required. It was the observance of the law of Moses, epitomised by the ceremony of circumcision, which was what they had filled the Galatians' minds with. The apostle had therefore set out a series of arguments as to why salvation through faith alone was the only and true way. For Paul this was not a theoretical or philosophical matter. The difference between the two teachings can be seen in the way it affects people in their lives and attitudes. This is the practical application that Paul will now engage in. As he does so, he begins with a word of warning. Christ brings freedom to all who put their trust in him. Paul explains what this freedom means in case people start to interpret it in the wrong way. This freedom introduces the person to a new lifestyle, which does not indulge the sinful appetites of human nature. Instead it obeys the commands of Christ, which are summed up by one of the Old Testament commandments, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Evidently, this was not happening amongst the Galatians. They were biting and devouring each other. Was that the result of the man-centred approach, which lay at the heart of the false teaching? For the Christian living out this command, he or she experiences the continual conflict between spiritual rebirth and the old sinful nature. They are opposed to each other and the battle between the two takes place all the time. It is only by living in the Spirit (depending upon Christ alone) that the Christian can be helped in this internal battle. Trying to live by obedience to the law will not help the person to overcome the desires of the sinful nature. This can only come about by continually being under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.



Two suggestions of what to preach about from these verses

1. “Serve one another in love”: Galatians 5:13

When a nation has won its freedom in any struggle against an oppressor, it has only won half the war. There is still the harder task of using the new-found freedom rightly. In the same way, to be freed from the obligation to keep laws and ceremonies for salvation is one thing; to live as a believer, rightly using the spiritual freedom Christ gives, is a harder thing. Believers are not free to do whatever they like. They are under a new law – holy love; they have a new master – the Holy Spirit; they have a new sphere of service – one another. Spiritual liberty means more self-discipline for the believer, not less! It is no longer adequate just to obey laws outwardly. There is to be inward obedience too.

- i. Love is the energy that causes faith to be productive of good (5:6). See “A suggestion of what to preach about”, Study 21, pages 203-204. Love is also the guard that protects liberty from leading to sin. This love delights only in holiness; this love only seeks the benefit of others; this love is intensely loyal to Jesus Christ. See 1 Corinthians 13. Without this love freedom from law-keeping is very dangerous.
- ii. The believer is indwelt by the Spirit from the moment of new birth (see 3:2, 4:6). The Spirit’s presence and his fruitful work in the believer’s life will guide the believer’s behaviour (verses 22,23). But the Spirit must not be grieved or quenched (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19). And he will never guide any believer to do anything contrary to the teaching of the Bible, which he inspired. Instead of being guided by fear of punishment or hope of reward or by the opinions of others, the believer is to be guided by the Spirit of Christ within him, giving him understanding of Bible teaching.
- iii. Christians are not to be individualists. Believers are to be slaves of each other (compare John 13:1-17). This “slavery” means believers are to have respect for each other; to seek the best welfare for each other; to be willing to give help to and receive help from each other; to worship, to serve Christ and to witness of him, with each other.

Although believers are freed from the necessity to keep the ten commandments as the way of salvation, their lives will now be full of all the goodness of those laws because, being inwardly and spiritually motivated by the Spirit, believers now seek to be Christlike (Rom. 8:4).

Christians should never behave contrary to the good purposes which are expressed by that law.

2. “They are in conflict with each another”: Galatians 5:17

(These notes are longer than usual. The material could be used for a series of sermons, rather than all at once.)

- i. Christians need to be good fighters! Not in order to fight each other, nor to fight anyone else; but each believer has a fight within himself or herself. The Christian life is a battle, not a sleep.
- ii. The Christian battle is fierce and lasts as long as life. This is because both powers – the Holy Spirit and the sinful nature – oppose each other. It is not merely one of the two that hates the other, but each hates the other. What the Holy Spirit proposes, “the flesh” resists. And this will go on as long as “the flesh” exists.
- iii. But unbelievers also know struggles of conscience in their lives. What is the vital difference between the soul-struggles of unbelievers and of believers? It is important to understand whether our soul struggles are Christian in nature. We must not deceive ourselves.
 - (A) **In unbelievers** the struggle is between the three parts of their own personalities: i.e. their reasoning, their desiring and their deciding: e.g.
 - a. The reasoning of the mind disagrees with the desires of the emotions, or
 - b. The desires of the emotions disagree with the decision of the will or
 - c. The decision of the will disagrees with the reasoning of the mind.**Unbelievers** say, for example:
 - a. “It would be unwise to do this, but I want to do it,” or
 - b. “I want to do this, but I will not,” or
 - c. “I will do this, but it is foolish to do it.”So there is conflict within the divided personality.

In believers the struggle is between the Holy Spirit and the old sinful ways in which believers used to behave before the Spirit indwelt them. In the believers’ experience, the Holy Spirit says within them:

“It is unholy to do this; it is unChristlike; it is against Scripture teaching; it will hurt the Christian fellowship; it will be a bad witness.”

But the united reasoning, desiring and will of the old sinful nature remaining in those believers often proudly replies:

“I can do this if I want to and I don’t care what the consequences are.”

Therefore the struggle is fiercer in the believer because:

- a. Two powers are involved – self and Spirit, and
- b. The old nature can be united against the Spirit and not weakly divided within itself.

See Galatians 5:19-25.

- (B) **In unbelievers** the struggle is usually to comfort themselves: e.g.
- a. They try to do what is least disruptive for themselves.
 - b. They try to do what best attracts others to themselves.
 - c. They try to do what most suits their previous upbringing.

It may cause much distress of soul to decide how best to achieve those things.

But the believers’ struggles are different:

In believers the struggle is about how best to please Christ.

- a. This may involve hardship and a cross for themselves.
- b. This may mean they become isolated from others.
- c. This may mean making great changes in their lives.

See Luke 9:57-62; 14:25-33.

Clearly the struggle may be much fiercer in believers because it may mean greater sacrifice and persecution.

- (C) **In unbelievers** the struggle is usually about keeping laws or standards, e.g. unbelievers often rebel against doing what they feel they ought to do. They may even feel angry at any restrictions they think to be preventing them doing what they want to do.

In believers the struggle is more likely to be about how to use the new spiritual freedom from law-keeping that Christ has given, e.g. believers are more often fighting against their old sinful habits which hinder them from freely expressing their new love for holiness and their desire to serve Christ. See Romans 7:15-21.

The struggle will be fiercer for the believer because love for a person (for Christ) is more powerful than fear of rules.

- (D) **In unbelievers** the struggle is usually more intense in public than in private life. When no one is watching them, they will do what they like – there is little inner struggle. Only when others see and

know do unbelievers struggle within themselves in order to appear acceptable to others. Moreover, unbelievers’ struggles are more concerned with visible actions than with secret thoughts.

In believers the struggle is as intense, or more so, in private life than in public. Because the struggle is between the Holy Spirit and their sinful natures, it does not cease when they are in private. And the Holy Spirit can challenge secret thoughts as well as outward actions. See Matthew 5:21-30.

The struggle will be more intense, more continual, for believers, because it concerns their inner life more than their public lives.

Conclusion

- i. Which kind of battle do you know?
- ii. Even though the Christian’s life is a battle, the Christian is not continually being defeated. As well as continual struggle, the believer can know continual victory - verse 18. Believers do not have to sin, even though old sinful habits still affect them because now the Holy Spirit indwells them in order to empower them to refuse to sin and to behave in a holy way. Believers have the choice! To be led by the Spirit is to follow the desires he puts into us and to refuse to follow what he shows to be wrong. That way of life will mortify the flesh.

The Spirit educates us through the teachings of the Bible. To ignore them will grieve the Spirit.



Over to you

How would you answer anyone in your congregation who asked you what freedom that person has in Christ? What could be the problems in your society for the wrong understanding of this teaching?

From the teaching of Paul against the reliance upon the law of Moses, do you think it would be wrong to have rules in your church?

How far would you use the commandment of “Love your neighbour as yourself” to be a pointer as to whether someone has truly trusted in Christ for salvation?