

“LIBERTY FROM THE LAW IS NOT LICENSE TO SIN”

We are now in what is sometimes described as the ethical section of Galatians, where Paul applies the doctrine that he set forth in the preceding chapters to the situation of these Christians. The theme of the passage we are studying today is closely related to the theme of the passage we studied last week, which was summed up in 5:1 in these words: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” And as we noted last week, that verse could be seen as a summary of the overall message of Galatians. Galatians is a book about Christian liberty. Now, up to this point in the letter, Paul has used the language of freedom to talk about the way in which the gospel sets us free from the yoke of the law. But in these verses his focus is on a different aspect of the liberty that we have in Christ. Here we learn that *our freedom from the law is not given so that we might indulge the flesh, but so that we might serve one another in love by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Our passage begins with Paul reasserting his main argument: “you were called to freedom, brothers.” The call of the gospel is a liberating call, a call that opens up the prison doors of the law and sets us free. In Christ we are no longer under the crushing yoke of the law. We have been set free from the system of legalism, a system in which we are required to keep the whole law if we want to be justified. But here Paul tells us that our freedom from the law is not to be used as a license to sin. This is what he means when he writes, “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.” To use

your freedom in order to sin is to miss the point of what Christian liberty is all about.

This is expressed well in our Westminster Confession of Faith, where it says,

“They who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life.” [20.3]

This is what Paul is saying in verse 13. The end, or the goal, of Christian liberty is holiness, not sin. It is not only freedom from something, but freedom for something. It is freedom to serve the Lord, which we will discuss further in just a moment.

First, though, I want to say a couple of things about this phrase “an opportunity for the flesh.” We have seen the term “flesh” several times in our study of this letter, and up to this point it has often referred to attempts to obtain God’s blessing by human effort. This is what Paul meant in 3:3 when he asked the Galatians “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” And it is also what he meant in 4:23 when he referred to Ishmael, the son whom Abraham had through Hagar, as being “born according to the flesh.” The efforts that Paul was describing in those passages were “fleshly” efforts because they were done in the strength of fallen human nature. This is what Paul means when he speaks of “the flesh,” and this helps us to understand why he speaks so negatively about the flesh. This is very important. Paul does not use the term ‘flesh’

negatively because he holds to a Gnostic view of human nature, a view which sees matter as inherently evil. Paul knew very well that God created the material world as good.

Whatever is wrong with human nature, it is not the fact that we are material beings.

Matter was created as something good. Neither is Paul speaking of the flesh as if it were a “lower nature” in man that stands in contrast to some supposed “higher nature” in man that is good. No, what Paul means by “the flesh” is the totality of man’s being as a fallen creature, including both body and soul. “The flesh” refers to man in his fallen estate.

Paul says that we are not to use our freedom in order to give the flesh an opportunity. Obviously, this presupposes that we continue to have a fleshly nature even after we are liberated from the yoke of the law. Paul will have more to say about this in verse 17. The thing that I want to point out now is the significance of this word “opportunity.” It is a word that was often used in military contexts to speak of a base of operations or a staging ground. Christians are not to use our freedom to give the flesh, our old fallen nature, a foothold. That nature is still there within us, but we are not to allow it to set up camp. Even allowing the flesh the smallest bit of room to maneuver can be deadly. This is why Paul tells us that we are not to give it any opportunity. This brings to mind a passage from *Mere Christianity*, where C.S. Lewis writes,

“Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later,

you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.” [132]

The more we resist the flesh, the more our spiritual muscles are exercised and built up, as it were. But the more we give into the flesh, the weaker and weaker we become in our ability to resist. This is why that great surgeon of the soul, John Owen, makes the following observation:

“where any known sin is indulged and no effort is made to mortify it, and where our religious duties are not used, applied and directed to the putting to death of sin and the flourishing of spiritual life, we will soon get weary of [our religious duties] and of God.” [*The Glory of Christ*, 157]

We all know what Owen is talking about here. If you give the flesh an opportunity, you can be sure that it will take it. The flesh is still a force to be reckoned with. It is not to be treated lightly. Don't think that you can indulge in a little sin and still be alright. That is a dangerous business. Here is good counsel from Owen: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

Paul tells us that the purpose of Christian freedom is not to give us the freedom to live in sin, but to give us the freedom to fulfill the law. What? Fulfill the law? Does Paul really say that? Yes, he does. It is the point that he is making in verses 13-14. Look at the statement at the end of verse 13. Paul says that, instead of using our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, we are to use it to serve one another through love. The interesting thing about this is that the verb “serve” refers to the service that a slave renders to his master. So Paul is telling us to use our freedom from the law to be slaves to one another. But this service that we render to each other is not to be offered grudgingly or out of mere duty. It is offered through love.

Paul then says that the whole law is fulfilled in the command to love your neighbor as yourself. We might wonder why Paul did not make mention of the command that Jesus said was the greatest of all, the command to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. But Paul’s purpose here, as we see in verse 15, is to confront the division and infighting that was beginning to emerge in these churches. That is why he cites the command that summarizes what the law says about human relationships. In addition, the way in which we demonstrate our love for God is by loving our neighbor. And the reason why we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves is because we all naturally love ourselves and seek what we think is good for us. God tells us to love others in the same way. Desire and seek what is good for your neighbor. Pursue his welfare as you do your own.

Verse 14 shows us that, even though the Christian has been set free from the yoke of the law, he is not done with the law. The Spirit's work in our lives results in the law being fulfilled in us as we serve one another in love. The law still applies to Christians because it still expresses God's holy will. Of course, we are no longer under the law as a covenant of works. We no longer live under the principle that says, "Do and live." But the freedom that we have in Christ enables us to walk according to God's will by the power of his Holy Spirit. Now we live under the principle that says, "Live and do."

It is important for us to see that the gospel does not make the law any less rigorous in what it demands. It is not as though the command to love your neighbor is a simplified and easier version of the Mosaic law. The thing that changes when we are set free in Christ is not the law itself but our relationship to the law. Listen to how Charles Spurgeon explained this:

"[The law] is not above a Christian – it is under a Christian. Some men hold God's law like a rod, in terror, over Christians, and say, 'If you sin you will be punished with it.' It is not so. The law is under a Christian; it is for him to walk on, to be his guide, his rule, his pattern...Law is the road which guides us, not the rod which drives us, not the spirit which activates us. The law is good and excellent, if it keep its place." [cited in Ryken, 223]

The Christian has been set free from the tyranny of the law so that the law can now serve as his faithful and trusted guide.

As we turn now to verses 16-18, we find Paul giving a further explanation of what he said in verse 13-15. These verses are essentially a restatement and clarification of what he said in the previous paragraph. He begins with these words, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Here is the way to avoid giving an opportunity to the flesh: walk by the Spirit. To walk by the Spirit is to live under the Holy Spirit’s control. We see this in Ephesians 5:18, where Paul says, “And do not get drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit.” Instead of being under the influence of alcohol, Christians are to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. And in that passage Paul summarizes what being filled with the Spirit looks like in these four points: (1) be present in corporate worship; (2) worship God earnestly, from your heart; (3) let your life be characterized by gratitude; and (4) yield to others and serve them for Christ’s sake. That is Paul’s definition of the Spirit-filled life.

Paul says that those who walk by the Spirit are given a promise. This is obscured a bit in the English translation, but it is very clear in the Greek. The first verb in verse 16 is a command. It says, “walk by the Spirit.” But the second verb is not a command. It says “you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” This second verb is a promise that is attached to the first verb. Paul is telling us that if we walk by the Spirit, we will be granted the ability to deny the flesh. To the extent that our lives are under the Spirit’s control, we will not give an opportunity to the flesh.

This leads to what Paul has to say in verse 17. The Spirit and the flesh are in irreconcilable conflict with each other in the life of a believer. And as we have said, this is a conflict that will continue throughout our entire lifetime. The only solution, the only way for the believer to prevail over the flesh is through ongoing dependence upon the Spirit of God.

Verse 18 provides an important reminder for us as we think about the ongoing struggle between the Spirit and the flesh in our lives. Paul reminds us that he is not talking about legalism here. While we are not to give the flesh an opportunity, this is not something that we are to undertake by our own efforts. That would be trying to overcome the flesh in the power of the flesh. The Christian call to a godly life is not a call to legalism. This is explained by commentator Ronald Fung in these words:

“the more earnestly a person strives to keep God’s law by his own efforts (= flesh), the more inextricably does he find himself in the grip of indwelling sin... the desires of the flesh cannot be overcome by the Christian remaining under the law.” [252]

It is not the outward constraint of the law that enables the Christian to live a holy life. It is the inward compulsion of the Spirit of God, who dwells within our hearts.