

DEFINING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

Galatians 5:13-15

The question raised recently, “We’ve talked a lot about grace and defined it, but when are we going to talk about what it looks like to practice it?” Well, I welcome you to the rest of Galatians. That’s what chapters 5 and 6 are all about. That’s exactly where Paul is going next – to the practical **outworking** of the doctrines discussed by the **inworking** of the Spirit. When Paul teaches doctrine, he also explains what it looks like to live it out. These few verses that are our text for today are almost like a short summary for the rest of the book. And, these verses are SO important that I honestly don’t feel like the few days I’ve had to study them and to prepare for them was enough. They are too important to rush through. These are verses that should be written on the walls of our homes and on the walls of your hearts through memorization – they’re that important. Paul defines here what Christian freedom looks like and if God’s people understood these 3 verses, so much conflict and pain and confusion would be done away with and God’s people would become greater agents of change in this world as they’re dedicated to purity and modeling grace. I just hope that I’ve done this text justice with this sermon. But if I could get you to turn with me to Galatians 5:13-15, that’s what we’ll read today.

While you turn there, I’ll tell you that when I was in taxidermy school (learning the trade of how to mount deer and fish and birds like you see on walls), the owner of the school had a beautiful showroom with a bunch of gorgeous mounts of different animals from all over the world. But back in the classroom area, behind the showroom walls and out of sight, we had this wall that was called the Not-Wall. The instructor had purchased or been given a bunch of different mounts done by different taxidermists that were all hideous. They were prime examples of what *not* to do. There’s some pretty ugly taxidermy out there. You often get what you pay for in the taxidermy world. It’s not a trade for everyone. It requires an artistic hand. One of the not-wall mounts I remember in particular, was even so ugly that we kept a cloth draped over it. I think it was supposed to be a black bear, looked more like a werewolf or Chupacabra. I think it was actually brought to the school to see if someone could fix it or redo it. But that’s what I think of when I think of this text. In regards to defining Christian freedom or Christian liberty, Paul shows us what not to do, and then shows us what to do. The not-wall and then the showroom.

So just as he did in Galatians 5:1 with his emancipation proclamation, Paul brings up our freedom again. He says “For you were called to freedom, brethren.” So we’ve been set free. We have freedom. We have liberty. All believers have been called by God, through the grace of Christ, to liberty and to stand firm in that liberty, but what does that liberty look like? In what ways do we have liberty? And because this idea of Christian liberty is so misunderstood, when Paul wrote and now, we need to ask ourselves, are we living with a proper perspective of Christian liberty? Are we properly living out what it means to be set free in God’s grace? It’s a very relevant question and something we must know as believers.

Already we have discussed in Galatians some ways we have been freed. We have been freed FROM the curse of the Law, with its continual ceremonies and works, and we have been freed TO the blessedness of being in Christ, knowing He paid it all and fulfilled the Law perfectly for us. The Bible says that by putting our faith in Christ, we have been freed FROM God’s wrath and condemnation and have been freed TO eternal life and divine righteousness. We have been freed FROM guilt and shame and freed TO forgiveness and reconciliation. We have been freed FROM being held captive to do Satan’s will in the kingdom darkness and have been freed TO the Father’s will in kingdom of light (Col. 11:13; I John 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:26). And in our text the first thing we see is that we also have been freed FROM the grip of the sin nature and freed TO live holy lives. That’s our first main point today, that Christian liberty is not a license to sin.

I. **CHRISTIANS LIBERTY IS NOT A LICENSE TO SIN. (V. 13a)**

Knowing we have been saved from sin does not now just make sinning okay. Salvation and being saved from our sins does not give us some authoritative permit to live in sin. Jude 4 clearly warned about those who false teachers teaching that – “ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” I also believe Hebrews 10:26-31 is teaching against this kind of error in God’s people – God’s people are not to willfully live in sin – it’s like trampling the Son of God underfoot and insulting the Spirit of grace. Paul says, “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh.” Our freedom in grace actually gives us greater reason to live holy lives. The **flesh** that Paul is referring to is not just his physical body but the part of us that is often referred to as the **sin nature**. The NLT says, “For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature.” The sin nature is that part of you that wants to sin even though you know it isn’t right or healthy. Paul described it as a law of sin at work in the members of his body (Rom. 7:23). It’s an inner disposition in man, an inherent nature, this bent toward sin, this inclination to sin. You know what I’m talking about because as a believer, by the *HOLY* Spirit, you wage war against it constantly.

Before we believed on Christ, we were nothing but slaves to the sin nature. We were captive to the flesh. Ephesians 2:3 says, we lived in the lust of the flesh, indulged the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath. And it’s been that way for every man since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Sometimes the flesh is even referred to as the Adamic nature. Romans 5:12 says, “just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” Every man, descendants from Adam, is born in sin with a sin nature. Man sinned against God and God removed His Spirit from man. But now that each of us has begun the restoration process from the Fall by putting our faith in Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit of God, we now have **two natures**. The sinful nature is still there but now we have a new nature. The **sin nature** is sometimes referred to as the old man or old self, and the **divine nature** as the new man, the new self, the new creation. **We can now choose** to live according to the sin nature or the divine nature, flesh or Spirit. It might not be the best way to describe it, but, we have options now – kind of like a twist cone – you can have chocolate or vanilla. But there’s only one good option and that’s to live according to the Spirit, the divine nature. God wants us walking by the Spirit, not the flesh. His whole purpose in giving us the Spirit of God is to redeem us from that fallen state of sin and become more Christlike and purify a people for Himself. Titus says God “gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.” This warlike process between the two natures is part of sanctification – growing in the Lord and glorifying Him as we decide to walk by the Spirit.

And the whole reason Paul brings this up is because his message of grace was often misunderstood. The Judaizers were no doubt claiming that Paul was an enemy of God and God’s Law because in their mind, if you tell believers that they are no longer under the works of the Law, then they’ll just think they can do whatever they want and live in sin. Many misunderstand it that way today as well and err by overcompensating to legalism. But biblical grace doesn’t promote sin at all – on the contrary – Titus 2:11-12 – “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.”

A. **The grace of God teaches us to live obedient lives (v. 13a)**

Our obedience is triggered through a principle a gratitude and love for God that the Law simply could not do. With the coming of Christ and His sacrifice and our being freed from slavery to the sin nature, man now has greater reason to live for God than ever before! Please turn with me to Romans 8:1-4. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For **what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did**: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” What we really needed was not just an external law outside of us, but a law from within! And that’s exactly what the Spirit of God does! He writes the Law on our hearts. Jeremiah 31:33, referring to the New Covenant that began at the cross, says, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it.” Ezekiel 36:26, also referring to the New Covenant, said, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and **cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.**” So now, rather than an outward circumcision, it’s inward, a circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29).

❖ **It’s not about circumcision, but about circumspection.** To be circumspect is to be careful and cautious or attentive and alert. We are actually awakened spiritually by the Spirit of God, more careful and attentive to observe God’s ordinances now because we love God and since Christ died for us and saved us by grace, we’ve never had greater reason to obey God. Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” Now that we have the Spirit of God, we do that and His commands aren’t burdensome. 1 John 5:3 says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” We delight in doing God’s Word and keeping His commands because of the Spirit of God in us. Whereas before, when we were unsaved, we were either totally offended by God’s commands and tried to reject God, or tried the religious route of keeping His commands to earn favor with Him, NOW, knowing we’ve been reconciled and forgiven, we delight to do them from the heart because we love Him. NOW when we sin, we’re actually grieved by it! One of the ways you know you have the Spirit of God in you is not because you are *sinless*, but because you sin less and are grieved when you do! There’s a heart that’s quick to repent over sin. The grace gospel takes away the desire to sin and instead of living any way we want, we now ask, as one commentator mentioned, “How can I live for Him?”

B. True Christian liberty avoids the extremes of legalism and lawlessness (v. 13a)

It is not legalism, but at the same time it is not license. It’s avoids either extreme. The two big words for these are nomism or antinomianism. Some of you have likely heard of antinomianism out of those two, but the word law comes from the Greek “nomos”. Antinomianism just means anti-law and nomism is just referring to legalism (justification by works). Christian liberty, however, is in the middle of those extremes.

LEGALISM←-----LIBERTY-----→LICENSE

Wiersbe wrote, “We are prone to go to extremes. One believer interprets liberty as license and thinks he can do whatever he wants to do. Another believer, seeing this

error, goes to an opposite extreme and imposes law on everybody.” Christian liberty is neither one. To live under legalism is to be subject to a yoke slavery (5:1) and to live under license is to give opportunity to the flesh (5:13), which results in slavery too. Both are slavery. What’s amazing about fallen man and especially the trend in culture today is that they can’t seem to understand that **living in sin (lawlessness) is just as much a system of slavery as a legalistic religion**. The cry of our culture today, and I just saw it this week on the news, in regards to abortion was, “Don’t mess with my freedom!” – “Don’t tell me what to do with my body!” And you can’t put the expectations of a believer with the Spirit on an unbeliever without the Spirit, but they need to know there’s freedom in Christ. A holy life is a free life. People think that by living how they want, gratifying the sinful desires of the flesh, they’re living in freedom but in reality, it’s slavery. You’re a slave to sin nature because you don’t have any other option and need to put your faith in Christ to receive the divine nature and be set free. In John 8:34, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin,” and the only way free is through faith in the Son. John 8:36 says, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

The perfect example of sin slavery is drug or alcohol addiction. You’ve seen those before and after pictures of what drugs and alcohol can do to people. Nothing about those pictures says, “That’s the life I want!” Nothing about their lives says, “That’s a life that’s free!” It’s the exact opposite. They’re slaves to the drugs and alcohol. All they can think about is when they’re going to get their next hit or next sip. The money they earn, goes right back to their master – drugs or alcohol. Someone who lives for the lusts of the flesh is described biblically as **a living dead person**. It’s a **zombie-like existence**, where you’re not really thinking about what you’re doing, you’re feeding on the desires of the flesh. 1 Timothy 5:6 says, “she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives.” He’s describing a life where you’re just responding to the impulses of the flesh. There’s a spiritual deadness with sin. James said that **when sin is conceived it brings forth death** (Jas. 1:15). It has a deadly effect on us, especially on our fellowship with God. Those who **haven’t** put their faith in Christ are walking around spiritually dead in sin. Some of you, who especially had a later conversion can look back on your B.C. days and say, “Yeah, that’s exactly what it was like. I did acted on the impulses of the flesh and didn’t realize it. I was like zombie.” Remember how Jesus described the prodigal son when he returned home to his father after blowing his inheritance and squandering everything he had on loose living in a distant country? First it says when he “came to his senses” (he started to think right), he returned home. Then it says when he returned home with a repentant heart, his father ran up to him and hugged him and kissed him, saying, “this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found (Lk. 15:24, 32).” He was dead but had come to life.

The Holy Spirit frees us from that deadness, that zombie-like existence where we are slaves to the sin nature. You didn’t know the Bible talked about zombies so much did you? Even though this war between the flesh and Spirit is not easy, true and growing believers obey God gladly. They really do experience over time, a wonderful and increasing freedom from the grip of the sin nature. We do experience the power of God at work in our lives through the Spirit. Salvation is holistic, encompassing every part of us – it’s not just merely forensic (like being acquitted of charges before a judge -

justified). God wants to redeem us through and through. Initial **Salvation** is a freeing from the **penalty** of sin. **Sanctification** is a progressive freeing from sin's **power** over us. And **Glorification** is the ultimate freedom in heaven from sin's **presence**. It's a holistic salvation. True Christian freedom, true Christian liberty, is not a license to sin because God's purpose is to glorify Himself through a people redeemed from sin's penalty, power and presence.

And then rather than using your freedom to gratify the sinful desires of the flesh...

II. **TRUE CHRISTIAN LIBERTY LOVINGLY SERVES OTHERS (VV. 13b–15)**

We have been freed FROM a self-servient life and freed TO live a life, loving serving others like Christ. A life that's set on the flesh and living according to the flesh is all about living for self. That's what the flesh wants to do. Living according to the flesh is a self-centered life, a self-focused life, a self-servient life. The first three words of the flesh we say is *me, my, mine*. You don't have to teach kids those words. The flesh wants to live for self and to an extreme, it doesn't care who gets in the way. It's going to do what it wants to do and no one's going to tell them otherwise and it's going to use other people to exalt itself. Legalism thrives on that fleshly self-focused attitude.

A. **Legalism creates an environment of carnal comparisons. (v. 15)**

It creates an environment where we're always making carnal (means fleshly – Jesus' incarnation was God taking on flesh) comparisons. Who meets my standards and who doesn't? The legalist will look down his nose at others and have holier-than-thou attitude. Instead of seeing everyone on the same plane (the same level) as all saved by grace, and instead of seeing his own progress in the Christian life as a result of God's grace or his enablement to live for God coming from God's Spirit and power by grace – sees himself as the product of his own self-effort and a step or two higher on the ladder everyone else. That was the attitude of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They thought that by their own self-effort and religious works and that they were justified before God. If I could get you to turn to Luke 18:9-14 with me, I'd like to take a look again at one of the more familiar examples. This is the perfect example of living under legalism. And a perfect example of the taxidermy illustration – what to do and what not to do. “And He also told this parable to some **who trusted in themselves that were righteous, and viewed others with contempt**. “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector [one who thought he was righteous and one who knew he wasn't]. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Those living under legalism tend to trust in themselves and their righteousness and view others with contempt. There's no doubt in my mind that since the Judaizers came along in the Galatian churches, the atmosphere went from one of family and fellowship and peace and joy, to one of comparisons and performance and striving – just like the Pharisees. The Judaizers were likely a sect from the Pharisees. This is why Paul says, “But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” The picture Paul is portraying is that of two animals going at it for life or death; dog-eat-dog. They're tearing each other apart and tearing each other down, rather than seeking to build the other up. That Pharisee only cared about himself; not the tax collector.

B. Liberty frees us to serve others like Christ. (vv. 13b, 14)

True Christian liberty frees us from such a self-servient, self-focused life and frees us to live like Christ, who came “not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). That’s what grace does. **It produces a heart of loving service.** When you understand the grace God has shown you in Christ, you can focus less on yourself. Think about it: in Christ...

1. God says you’ve had your sins forgiven, completely paid for.
2. God says you have eternal life.
3. God says He has a place for you in heaven.
4. God says He’ll never leave you nor forsake you.
5. In Galatians so far, Paul’s said we’ve been justified, given the promised Spirit, heirs, sons of God, we have an Abba Father relationship. We have everything we need in Christ. We’re covered.

You know, the four big things everyone is searching for in this world is love, acceptance, security and significance. So when you understand that you are loved in Christ, accepted in Christ, secure in Christ and have been given incredible significance as a child of God in Christ, you stop focusing on yourself and your needs so much and focus on serving God by serving others! You begin to operate with a quiet assurance that doesn’t worry about you so much because you know God loves you and you can begin to invest in others. If you live according to the Judaizers’ theology where there’s no assurance, you can never focus on anybody else because you’re too busy trying to measure up and even when you do serve others, in the back of the mind, you just end up using them to try to get your brownie points with God. But when true liberty is understood, it produces loving servants who serve like Christ, but also get this:

C. We fulfill the Law when we love our neighbor (v. 14)

Paul said, “the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” No Judaizer and no Pharisee, no Jew in general, would have EVER said that! To them, the Law was never fulfilled! There was always more to do because you were always failing to meet the standard. They were to **actively** do the Law, keep the Law, and guard the Law.¹ But Paul says through faith, we establish it (Rom. 3:31) and fulfill it. How can it be fulfilled through that statement of loving your neighbor as yourself? Well think about some of the commandments. The Law said, “Do not bear false witness.” If you love your neighbor, you’re not going to lie to him. The Law said, “Do not steal.” If you love your neighbor, you’re not going to steal from him. The Law said, “Do not kill.” If you love your neighbor, you’re not going to kill him. The Law said, “Do not have any other gods before Me.” If you love your neighbor and want what’s best for him, you won’t have other gods but will try to point him to the One True God. Beyond the 10 commandments, the Law said things like, “Cursed is he who moves his neighbor’s boundary mark.” If you love your neighbor you won’t try to take his land. The Law said, “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.” Love upholds justice for foreigners, orphans and widows.

Jesus said upon **two commands** depends the whole Law and the prophets and I think they’re both hinted at in these verses: **loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, & loving your neighbor as yourself.** If you really love God, you’re going to obey Him, not treating His grace as license. And if you love your neighbor, same thing, you obey God. Paul says we’re to fulfill **the law of Christ** mentioned in Galatians 6:2 –

“Bear one another’s burdens and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” What’s the law of Christ? He’s probably referring to John 13:34 where Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jesus prayed in John 17 that we would be perfect in unity so that the world would know He’s the one. When we are committed to true Christian liberty, being committed to purity and to loving each other, God’s people become agents of great transformation in this world – so that the world may know. That’s what it’s like to live out this grace gospel.

Also remember that the individualistic interpretation of this is not necessarily to be preferred over the cooperate interpretation, because if the Galatians are going to work through everything that Paul is writing to them, they’ve got to walk by the Spirit, loving one another and not giving their flesh an opportunity.

I’ve been watching a documentary recently on the history of the United States and the winter at Valley Forge during the American Revolution reminded me a lot of this situation. The winter at Valley Forge for George Washington’s patriot troops was incredibly tough. They had little clean water so dysentery set in; 1/5 of them had no shoes; food wise, they had no meat, but were living off a flour and water soup; smallpox set in; to add to it, they were a melting pot of people from different backgrounds, including slave and free and many freed convicts. With that kind of environment, the people grew increasingly agitated and started fighting each other. George Washington was there though, like the apostle Paul to the Galatians, to convince them that if they’re going to win this war, they’ve got to stand together and quit responding to the desires of the flesh, so to say. They’ve got to be in it together, lovingly serving each other and bearing one another’s burdens.

That’s what it’s like to live out this grace gospel. Because we were served by God and God showed us His grace, while we were still sinners, so we are to serve others and show them grace, even while they’re still sinners. **The grace gospel produces gracious people who then extend God’s grace to others.**

¹ David A. DeSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 450-451.