

Galatians 5:13-26
September 20, 2020

- 1) Introduction – Verse 13 begins a new section of the book of Galatians that continues through 6:18. These verses are filled with imperative verbs exhorting the Galatians to use their Christian freedom in a responsible fashion. Freedom can be lost if it is misused. For Paul, freedom is best expressed in a life directed by God’s love that is seen in service to others. This love is empowered by the gift of God’s spirit. Paul is doing battle here against 2 opponents. 1st there are those advocating the necessity of circumcision, and to them Paul announces freedom from the law. That argument is the focus of the 1st part of this book. 2nd there are those who have abused their freedom by living their life without restraint. It is against these libertines that Paul battles in these closing passages.

- 2) Galatians 5:13-15 – Freedom and Love
 - a) Verse 13 begins with the phrase: “you were called to freedom,” which summarizes the previous message of Paul’s letter. (See last week’s lesson on Galatians 5:1.) Then Paul addresses the Gentile converts of Galatia as if they were the Jewish people who had been freed from their Egyptian bondage. Like the ancient Jews, the Christians of Galatia were also called to freedom. That summons to freedom not only announced the loss of their shackles, but also proclaimed a challenge, a task, and a calling. Their freedom was meant to be used in loving service to others. So, Paul warns these new Christians: “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” The gift of freedom can be used poorly by focusing on oneself and neglecting others. Or freedom can be used wisely in service to others. Each believer has before them a choice. The last phrase of verse 13 asked the believers to use their freedom to lovingly “become slaves to one another.” What an ironic demand for new believer: use your freedom to offer yourself in bondage to others.

 - b) This concept of finding our freedom to be ourselves while sacrificially serving other people is not an easy thing. Years ago, I had a teacher who used the strings of violin to illustrate this lesson. Before being placed and then stretched on the violin the strings are useless and they can make no melody at all. But stretched tightly and correctly tuned on the musical instrument the result can be magnificent. Sometimes we are at our best when

we see ourselves as enslaved in service to others. Only then can we become our best selves. We can become what we were meant to be.

- c) Verse 14 provides the reason for choosing the wise pathway of using freedom to serve others. Doing so would fulfill the law as stated in Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is one more reminder by Paul, a devout student of the law, that the Torah contains a great deal of the gospel message. He sees the Christian message of sacrificial service as a fulfillment of the law. Love puts the law in proper perspective.
- d) Verse 15 helps the reader to realize that Paul is not just dealing with a mental argument or a potential dispute. He is dealing here with a true to life situation in the Galatian church where members are warring with one another. The images used by Paul in this verse picture a vicious fight between wild animals ending in death. The bickering in the church could have been centered on the circumcision issue, but in the previous 5 chapters Paul never mentions a group within the church that is aligned with him in this debate. Probably the loud bickering is a result of a fight between libertines who feel themselves freed from ethical constraints; or perhaps the fight is centered on persons who have abused their use of spiritual gifts. This 2nd possibility is reflected in verse 26 when Paul warns persons not to be conceited by seeing themselves as superior because of their spiritual gifts. We saw this same debate in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians.

3) Galatians 5:16-26 – The Spirit and the Flesh

- a) “Live by the Spirit.” The spirit has already played a prominent role in the book of Galatians. Paul spoke of his initial preaching to the Galatians when God’s spirit was evident in their lives. In the verses that follow Paul will describe the spirit as the source of freedom and love. In verse 16 Paul is pleading with the Galatians to live by the spirit and then they will never be focused on gratifying desires of the flesh. The way to guard against the sin of self-indulgence is to strive constantly to live by the leading of God’s spirit.
- b) Our biblical text translates the Greek word, SARX, as flesh and places it in stark contrast the term SPIRIT. The term appears often in the New

Testament and is often used to designate a person's physical character or human nature and is not necessarily a pejorative term assuming that flesh is evil and corrupt. In this instance Paul is not saying that material or bodily things are evil or that human desires and physical pleasures are to be denied and avoided. What Paul is warning about in this passage is when flesh becomes the norm by which we live. When we are guided by bodily desire then we are not being led by the spirit.

- c) In verse 17 Paul envisions a battlefield where the 2 powers of flesh and spirit are opposed to one another. The battlefield is our human life and it is our human freedom that is at stake. In verses 19-21 Paul describes the works of the flesh. It is possible to lose our freedom to any of these human foibles. When we apply these verses in the context of Galatia, Paul is addressing those libertines who feel their freedom allows them to act in any way they desire. Paul warns those people in verse 21 that a person who abuses their freedom in that way "will not inherit the kingdom of God." Notice how many items in the list apply directly to sins that can emerge within a church: "strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, and factions." In the context of Galatia, these issues could also arise when persons attempt to view their brand of spirituality as superior to others.
- d) When applying these verses in our contemporary situation, we want to focus on other persons whose lives have been ruined in these ways, but the truth is meant for each of us as well. There are times when we have all lost our way and have been consumed by some form of sin. It would be best not to repeat the pharisaical prayer of thanking God that we are not like those other sinners. Before God, we are all in the wrong.
- e) It's important to focus on the fruit of the spirit in verses 22 and 23. Notice in verse 19 the plural was used in speaking of the "works of the flesh." In contrast, verse 22 speaks in the singular of "the fruit of the spirit." There is a unified character in what is produced by the spirit. Love comes 1st in the list, not because it is the most important characteristic in a long list of things, but because it is inherent in all that it means to be led by the spirit. Love is the essence of what it means to live in the spirit of Christ.

- f) In the context of the Galatian congregation this list serves an important purpose as noted in verse 26. If there are members of the church who felt superior because of their ecstatic spirituality, Paul is bringing them back to earth when he speaks of “peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” The spirit does not separate us through competition and conceit. In like manner, if there are those in the congregation who feel less spiritual because they have not had such ecstatic experiences, they have no reason to be envious or angry with others. They too must learn to practice “peace, patience, kindness, and generosity”
- g) The list of the fruit of the spirit also gives us a helpful guide for discerning where and when the spirit is at work. How can we be sure that a person’s claim to be acting in God’s spirit is true? How can we determine for ourselves if we are being led by the spirit instead of by our own human desires? This listing provides some helpful hints from Paul. Is it loving, does it bring joy and peace, does it exemplify patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

Questions for Reflection:

1. In making decisions do you find yourself asking: what is the will of God for me? How do you determine what is the right thing to do? Does it help to reflect on Galatians 5:22-23 in dealing with these issues?
2. Do you find it contradictory to follow Paul’s advice about using our Christian freedom to become slaves to one another? Is it possible for you to find freedom and discover your best self through sacrificial service to others?