5-18-25

Galatians 5:13-18

Some people we call Judaizers have infiltrated Paul’s beloved church in the province of Galatia. They insist that the law of Moses must be followed, along with believing in Jesus, in order to be saved. Some in the church were being swayed by their false teaching. As we have stressed along with Paul in our study of Galatians, the Gospel is faith Jesus Christ alone. Any claims of Jesus plus anything else is a false gospel and not to be followed.

Any gospel that is based on works is very attractive to us. We naturally feel like we have to do something to help earn our salvation. Plus, if we do something, then we can take some of the credit. However, that whole idea is demonstrating unbelief, and lack of faith in Jesus and His perfect work on the cross. Paul has been hammering away that any attempt at following the law for salvation is entirely off-track and leads to perdition.

Now the Law of God is good and perfect. It displays the character of God Himself. And the giving of the Law was a beautiful gift from God because it reveals His heart to us. Part of the new covenant in Christ is that His Law will be written on our hearts. We will be drawn to following it because it is pleasing to our Lord. But the Law cannot save us. It cannot save us because we can’t follow it.

Paul has been very straightforward on this issue; but Paul is too astute regarding the sinful nature of human-beings. Now he has to make sure the pendulum doesn’t swing too far in the other direction. It is a natural thing for people to reason like this: The Gospel says that if I accept Jesus as my Lord and Saviour, due to His work on the cross, all my sins, past, present, and future are forgiven. If that is the case, I can accept Jesus as my Saviour and then I can do anything I want. All my sins are gone.

I think and I hope that everyone in here is a mature enough Christian to realize that it doesn’t work that way. But there are people who come to that conclusion and that is just the carnal mind at work. So Paul begins this section by saying, “*For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*” When Paul refers to the flesh here, he is referring to our fallen sinful nature, our carnal man, our Old Man.

That’s an important distinction. Our flesh, our bodies were crated by God and He declared His creation to be good. The idea of our bodies being evil led to another false teaching called “Gnosticism”; which stated that our bodies are evil and must be treated as such. Salvation was to be obtained by reaching a higher knowledge so our bodies can be done away with. One of the heresies in this teaching was that Jesus did not come in the flesh, because flesh is evil.

The Bible is very clear that Jesus did come in the flesh. If flesh itself were evil, then God the Son could not have clothed Himself in it. We need to be careful when reading the Bible, especially Paul’s letters, to discern whether the word flesh means carnal nature or simply one’s body. Obviously here it is referring to our carnal nature.

Our carnal nature is evil. That is our fallen nature; the nature we inherited from Adam when he first sinned in the Garden of Eden. We have it when we are born; and it won’t go away until we stand before Jesus. So, our sinful nature’s default position is to take the beautiful gift of freedom offered by Christ, and turn it into an excuse to do whatever it pleases.

Here’s why that logic of the flesh doesn’t work with the freedom offered by Jesus. Remember that Jesus did give us commands. Following those commands don’t get us into heaven, but following them shows how grateful we are to our merciful God who has given us undeserved salvation. And here’s something else we don’t want to miss: The freedom Christ gives us is the freedom to follow the commands of Jesus. Without believing in Jesus for salvation; without having the enabling power of the Holy Spirit; we are incapable of following the commands of Jesus. And the prime example of this is loving and serving your neighbor.

Now we can always find those who are not Christians who will do kind things for others. We can find them serving others and sacrificing their time for them. But their motivation will be wrong; it will be for social points or self-esteem or bragging rights; any number of things. Also, they will have no problem hating someone else down the street; or trying to obtain vengeance if they feel wronged. For the Christian, while we struggle with these things, it ought not be this way.

We are called to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, avoid taking our own vengeance, never return evil for evil. Jesus Himself quoted the same verse from Leviticus 19:18 that Paul quotes here, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Some do a better job of loving themselves better than others; still, if you’re hungry, you eat; if you’re thirsty, you drink; you get some sleep and clothe yourself, you try to keep from getting sick or hurt. We are to treat our neighbors with that same love. And Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan tells us who our neighbor is.

And furthermore, Jesus actually raised the bar. In John 13:34 Jesus says, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”* Let that sink in for a while. Think of what all Jesus went through on our behalf even while we were His enemies. We are to love our enemies the same as Jesus loved His; us.

Obviously, this is impossible for us; but that does not let us off the hook. Because we have the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are capable, through His strength, to love others in this way. Another way of saying that is that we are free to love others as ourselves; we have that freedom in Christ that the carnal man does not have.

Paul tells us in verse 14 that the whole Law is fulfilled in loving others as yourself. And the whole Old Testament law was about how to love God and how to love others. And if you love God, that is what gives you the ability to love others. The apostle John touches on this in his first letter chapter 4 verse 20: *If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*

Let me point out one final problem with the carnal desire to use our Christian liberty as an opportunity for the flesh. Our carnal nature is selfish; we want things to go our way and we want others to serve us along with our whims; it puts the needs of others far behind our own wants; the lusts of our flesh are not concerned with the welfare of others as long as our lusts are met. Our carnal nature is diametrically opposed to the command of Jesus to love others as yourself. We cannot possibly do both. To live according to our sinful nature is a very strong indication that we have not truly turned to Christ for salvation; our eternal life is in jeopardy.

Verse 15 indicates that along with heading this incorrect idea of Christian liberty off at the pass; there may already be a faction in the Galatian church that is following this line of thinking. If any follow this line of thinking in any church; it will lead to the destruction of the church.

The wording “bite and devour” would have brought to mind ferocious wild animals in a free for all. Once more Paul is using shocking wording to try to get their attention. Still, it’s not far from reality. If there are people in the church who live according to a carnal attitude, all their motivation will be selfish. They will clash with others who are living the same way; and with those who are trying to live a sincerely Christian life. You can see that unity would be impossible to achieve in this setting.

If you have ever been in a church setting or even a work setting, where there are different factions vying for their own way, you know what a miserable environment that is. And Paul tells them what will happen: they will be consumed; they will be destroyed. The idea is destruction by fire. Not a pretty picture. A church will either die or split; either way, people will be hurt.

I’ve mentioned before that I think this church has a good foundational unity. And I think about Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian church where he says to them: *Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.* (4:1) So, going from the words of Paul: You are walking in unity, but I ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that you excel still more.

Unity, especially in a church because of the constant attacks of satan, is not natural for us. It involves giving of self and sacrificing our own wants sometimes. Unity must be worked for, in the strength of the Holy Spirit. We cannot let our guard down and we cannot coast. We must always be vigilant in loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, and putting them before ourselves.

Now Paul makes a fairly simple statement: *“[W]alk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.”* That is a true statement, but that’s not something we are very good at. Paul goes into the reason for that in the next verse; but let’s look at “*Walk by the Spirit*”. In this case, we can take Paul to mean the Holy Spirit. To walk in something means to live your life accordingly; to have that as the guiding principle of your life.

We want to walk by the Spirit, but how do we do that. Well, it’s difficult; and it takes learning and experience: part of what we call the sanctification process. And sanctification is lifelong and won’t be completed until we stand before Jesus.

Once we accept Christ, we are given the unimaginable gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. From that moment, He will give you guidance and He does so in different ways. Sometimes it is your conscience speaking to you; sometimes Scripture might come to mind; sometimes it’s an insight into God’s word. These are just a few possibilities; each of us has to work at listening to the Holy Spirit and recognizing His voice.

There are some things we can do to cooperate in this process. First is read your Bible so He has more to speak with you about. Secondly is to ask Him to help you recognize His voice, tell Him you want to follow His leading and ask for His help. That’s what everything really comes down to; depending entirely on God. One thing we must not do is resist Him. We must be careful to not quench the Spirit. That is done by ignoring Him or doing other than what He has guided you in.

And when it is actually the Holy Spirit leading you; He will never contradict Scripture: He will not add to it and He will not take away from it. He will always promote unity in a church body, but never at the expense of truth. Just a couple ideas to help you follow the Holy Spirit’s leading.

While walking in the Spirit seems like it should be simple, it is not. In verse 17 Paul talks about the problem of the flesh verses the Spirit. He is very direct; our carnal sinful nature is in direct opposition to what the Holy Spirit leads us to do. This is why we still fall into sin, this is why we sometimes can’t even figure out why we did what we did.

Several miracles take place when we turn to Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. One is rebirth. Our spirit, the God-given human spirit that resides within us, is brought to life. It was dead, separated from God because of our sin. But our spirit is made new when we turn to Christ. All our sins are wiped away as if they never existed; all our guilt is removed; we are then covered in the righteousness of Jesus. These are miracles and there are many more.

In addition to our own spirits being reborn, the Holy Spirit comes to live within us and be our constant help and guide. As precious and wonderful as that is, our carnal man doesn’t like that. When we accept Christ, we become a new creation, but for the time being we still live in our fallen flesh. We have to deal with that, and God has His perfect reasons for doing things that way.

One of the reasons is that we are in a spiritual battle and we need to practice fighting. As we are told in Psalm 144:1, *Blessed be the LORD, my rock, Who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle.* Also, because we will fail, we need to keep returning to the Lord in repentance. This is training us to be dependent on Him.

Paul finishes this section with: *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.* All those who are not in Christ Jesus, will be judged by God’s Law. And the judgement will not be good. But if you are led by the Holy Spirit, that means that you have been saved by the work of Christ on the cross. His blood has cleansed you and you are justified before God. You are free from the Law. And so those blessed words from Romans 8:1, *“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

Prayer

Blessed Lord, thank You for the freedom You have given us in Christ Jesus our Saviour and King. We have freedom from the impossible task of working our way into heaven. We have freedom from the heavy yoke of the Law. Most importantly, we have the freedom to be pleasing to You. We are enabled to follow the commands of Your Son, of whom You said, “*This is My beloved Son, listen to Him*.”

Thank You for condescending to allow the gift of Your Holy Spirit to live within us to be a constant guide and companion. Help us Lord to never grieve or quench Him. We desire His guidance and we desperately need His help in all aspects of life. Help us Lord, to walk in the Spirit in everything we do.

Now we also ask that Your Holy Spirit would live in this church body. Keep us in unity in Your word that we may grow as individuals in Christ and as Christ’s church. Open our eyes to carnal desires as they try to creep in, so that they may be stopped before they take root.

All these things we pray in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord

Amen