

RESPONSIBLE CHRISTIAN FREEDOM
GALATIANS 5:13-26

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

One of the biggest rites of passage for teenagers is getting a driver's license. How that happens has varied over time and from state-to-state. Here in Nevada teens have to take an online course. Then they have to pass a test in order to get their learner's permit. Then they need to have so many hours of practice driving with an adult. Then they have to take a road test with an examiner. A couple of years ago they dropped the requirement from the test to do parallel parking, which made things considerably easier for many teens. If teens pass that test, they get their driver's license. Along with that comes a certain measure of freedom.

For me getting a driver's license as a teen meant that sometimes I could take a car to school. My high school was two miles from our house. Sometimes I had after school activities. That meant that I sometimes had to walk home, sometimes carrying my heavy baritone horn. Having a car made things considerably easier. My family also had a camping trailer. My mom did not drive. When we did camping trips, I could now drive the other car and pull the boat for our trips. That gave the family a certain additional measure of freedom.

In my era teens could buy alcohol at age 18. So just a year or two after getting a driver's license, teens could go to bars. That was a potential problem and danger for high school seniors. Of course there are other dangers and temptations that come along for young people with having the freedom to drive, assuming that they have access to a car. It is often an early test to see how our kids are going to turn out by observing how they handle that freedom to drive.

In our study on Sunday mornings of the New Testament Book of Galatians we have seen that the Apostle Paul has been hammering away about the true nature of the Gospel. He has been reminding the new Christians in the Roman province of Galatia in Asia Minor that people become right with God through simple faith in Jesus. He keeps stressing the point that we humans cannot earn our way to God. We cannot be good enough to win His favor. He paid the penalty for our sins in dying on the cross. Our responsibility is simply to put our trust in Him.

If indeed we do that, we have a great situation. We have great freedom. So it is that we saw last week from v. 1 of #5 that the Apostle wrote, **"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** The slavery he was talking about was a rules-based approach to winning God's favor, what we sometimes describe as legalism. If the Gospel is indeed so good, if it gives genuine Christians such freedom, the issue becomes: What will we do with it? Such is the concern of the passage before us this morning.

I.

From vv. 13-15 of #5 in Galatians we learn that CHRISTIAN FREEDOM SHOULD RESULT IN LOVING SERVICE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM SHOULD RESULT...) The apostle writes in v. 13, **“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”** We have seen that the term “flesh” refers to our sinful human nature, to our baser instincts, to our inner desire to do what we want to do.

Now the reaction of many outsiders to the simplicity of the Gospel is that it seems too easy. Simply by trusting in Jesus people can have eternal life and forgiveness of sins? What is there to keep Christians from doing whatever they want to do?

There are at least three things which need to be taken into consideration. **First**, Paul a couple of times in this letter has described becoming a Christian as being adopted into the family of God. Trusting in Jesus means taking on God as our Heavenly Father. He is indeed a great Father to His children. But that also means that He is a disciplinarian. (HEBREWS 12:7) The author of the New Testament Book of Hebrews writes in #12 v. 7, **“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?”** If we are truly Christians, our Heavenly Father will discipline us when we get out of line.

Then, **secondly**, the Christian life is the best possible life to live. Christian freedom means living according to the way God created us to live. That generally means following our owner’s manual, the Bible. This is the best route to meaning and purpose in life. Then also the Lord has made each of us different with our own talents, and gifts, and experiences which are intended to be useful to Him and to people around us.

Thirdly, a realization and appreciation for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ should produce a response of love and appreciation which is reflected in loving service for Him and for people around us. If we are truly Christians, we are going to spend eternity in a wonderful place, often called heaven.

Paul continues in v. 14 in our passage: **“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”** Jews who claimed to be Christians were trying to convince the Galatian Christians, who were mostly Gentiles, that they needed to follow the Law of Moses to be completely right with God. In effect, they had to become Jews. That meant taking on all of the laws of the Old Testament plus the many additional rules which the rabbis over the years had added to them.

Paul says that Jesus has provided an alternative to this. His Messiahship, His death and resurrection have provided a certain freedom for his followers. Our connection with Him leads to loving service, which was the intent of the Old Testament law anyway.

Paul quotes from Leviticus #19 v. 18. Jesus was once asked about the greatest commandment. He replied that the greatest commandment is to love God with all of our

being. The second greatest is to love our neighbor as ourself. It is this focus which leads to a proper use of freedom. It perhaps also relates to a problem which he sees among some of the Galatians.

Thus the author writes in v. 15, **“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”** We don’t know the exact issue that prompted this warning. Maybe there were disagreements that related to the teaching of these Judaizers, these Jewish legalists. Maybe it was something else that was going on. We have to remember that these Galatians were still new Christians. They didn’t yet have a manual in their possession about how to live the Christian life. They were still sinners. And they were following One who told His followers to love their enemies.

Christian freedom, as compared to living by rules, can be a great thing. Dogs can be categorized in three ways. There are some dogs who are kept on a chain in the backyard. If they are not kept on a chain, they are kept in a tightly enclosed area. They usually want to be free, but they have to be restrained. They have to live by restrictions.

Then, secondly, there are some dogs which just seem to run free. We had one dog like that. We adopted Mikey. He had this knack of escaping out of all kinds of enclosures. He would then run free. We got calls from animal control and from neighbors sometimes when we did not even know that he had escaped. He was a problem. Dogs like that sometimes get run over. Or around here smaller dogs like Mikey may become supper for the coyotes. That is the problem with unrestrained freedom.

Then there is a third kind of dog. This is the dog who just loves to please his master. Sammie was a dog like that for us. She was a Black Lab-Irish Setter mix. We got her before we had kids, and we gave her a lot of attention. She was trained well. Sammie became so devoted to us that we really did not even need to use a leash with her. In Connecticut we lived across a busy highway from our church. Sometimes I would take her to the office with me. I would not use a leash. I would call Sammie to be by my side before we crossed the highway. She would be right there. When the way was clear, I would signal that she could go across. She would then run across onto the church yard. It was a big lawn, and she would chase the birds and chase the squirrels. When I got to the door of the church office, I would call her and she would be right there. She would lay at my feet when I did my office work. If I had a visitor, she would greet them without jumping on them. The return home would go in a similar way.

Life was good for Sammie, and she was good for us. She needed very little restraint, because she was devoted to her masters and just wanted to please us. She enjoyed a fair amount of freedom. That is the kind of relationship that God wants with us. Life can be pretty good when we live to please our Savior. We know that there are certain boundaries, but there is great freedom and joy that comes from serving the One who loves us.

II. A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. LOVING SERVICE REQUIRES WALKING...) In the remainder of the passage we learn that LOVING SERVICE REQUIRES WALKING BY THE SPIRIT. In the first part of this section we find out that CHRISTIAN FREEDOM OPERATES IN THE MIDST OF PERSONAL SPIRITUAL WARFARE. (II. LOVING SERVICE... A. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM...) Paul writes in vv. 16 & 17, **“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”**

Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul talks about spiritual battles which involve external forces. In the gospels we find several incidents where Jesus confronts people who are possessed by demons. In our recent study of the Book of Daniel we saw glimpses through Daniel of spiritual forces which are involved in controlling and influencing nations.

Here Paul is talking about an internal spiritual battle. Reference is made in v. 17 to the Spirit, which appears to mean the Holy Spirit. Back in #3 v. 2 Paul reminded the Galatian Christians that they had received the Holy Spirit through faith. When a person becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit comes to reside within him or her.

The Apostle Paul speaks about this indwelling Holy Spirit in Romans #8 v. 9. (ROMANS 8:9) He writes there, **“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”** So we find confirmation here that every genuine Christian has the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, or the Spirit of Christ dwelling in him or her. The three terms are descriptive of the same Being.

Reference is also made in vv. 16 & 17 in our passage to the flesh. This again is that sinful nature which still resides within us. It is that sinful inclination which tempts us to do wrong. It is that tendency we experience to please ourselves, to do what we want to do, to bring attention and glory to ourselves. The Apostle John (1 JOHN 2:16) provides a description of how this sin nature manifests itself. He writes in #2 v. 16 of his first epistle: **“For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.”** The world system around us feeds our fleshly desires and produces these undesirable results.

The Apostle Paul in Romans #7 describes this internal spiritual battle that he experienced. Yet it is in this setting in which it is possible to experience Christian freedom. The temptation that Christians face to deal with these sinful desires is to live by rules. (PROJECTOR OFF) My wife attended a Christian college that had all kinds of rules. There were restrictions about when you had to go to sleep and how you had to make your bed. There were strict requirements about the clothes you could wear and the music that you could listen to. Yet in spite of that there were students who slept around and some who had little spiritual interest.

My experience was just the opposite. I went to a public university which had very few rules. It was hard to walk down the dorm floor on Friday night without getting high. Yet the committed Christian students determined to live differently because they wanted to follow Jesus, and there was a certain freedom that came with that.

The proper way to deal with this internal spiritual warfare, Paul says in v. 16 is to walk by the Spirit. In v. 18 he says, **“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”** The Judaizers, the legalists, claimed that there were only two options available to deal with this situation. One was to submit to the Old Testament law with all of the additional rules which the rabbis had added over the years. You Galatians should believe in Jesus plus follow all of these rules. Then you might find acceptance with God.

The other option in their mind was to live a wild life. Life was pretty wild in first century Galatian and in the broader Roman Empire. Seneca was a Roman philosopher and the chief advisor to Nero who was on the throne during part of the life of the Apostle Paul. Seneca once wrote, **“Innocence is not rare, it is non-existent.”** (*On Anger*, 2,8)

National leaders often set the tone for the moral environment of their country. Nero had a wild life. He had his mom killed. At one point he had a fit of rage during which he kicked his pregnant wife in the stomach and killed her. He had regrets about that. When he saw a teenage boy who reminded him of his wife, he had him castrated and made him his wife. Eventually he also had his chief advisor Seneca killed. He blamed Christians for the fire which destroyed Rome and persecuted them.

Paul in our passage says that there is a third way to deal with internal spiritual battles. It is to live life directed by the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit sensitizes us to God’s will. He gives Christians an intrinsic set of values. He also gives us spiritual power to do good.

Paul describes something about how this works in Philippians #2 vv. 12 & 13. (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPIANS 2:12B-13) There he writes, **“... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”** He does not say work for our salvation. We Christians have a certain responsibility to work out our salvation, to live the Christian life, to live out the implications of what it means to be a Christian, but we must realize that it is God who is at work in us. The Holy Spirit gives us power to do what is right. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in our passage look at vv. 19-21: **“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”**

The deeds of the flesh are the product of our unchecked sinful nature. As Solomon said in the Book of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. We humans still struggle with the same basic issues. The first three on the list are sexual sins, with

which we are familiar in our day. Idolatry comes next. That sin involves not just worshiping physical images but also putting anything in the place that only God should occupy. Good things like a career or a mate or kids can become idols if we treat them like objects of worship.

Many of the next items on the list involve human relationships. People often don't get along with each other. Then there is drunkenness and orgies. Paul adds "things like these." So this is not intended to be a complete list. But we get the idea.

These negative qualities are characteristic of the life of an unbeliever. It is not that Christians will never mess up in these areas. But these things should not be characteristic of Christians. People whose lives are characterized by these traits will not inherit the kingdom of God. At the return of Christ our Lord will establish a kingdom upon the earth. Unbelievers will be excluded from it.

Thus in vv. 16-21 we have a description of the challenging spiritual environment in which we Christians live. But because of the Holy Spirit's residence in our lives, we have hope. For we have a new power in us, which enables us to experience a certain freedom and joy in this world.

B.

In vv. 22-26 we find that CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS PRODUCTIVE THROUGH DEPENDENCE ON THE HOLY SPIRIT. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS PRODUCTIVE...) We read in vv. 22 & 23, **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."** Such is the contrast we have with the fruit of the flesh. These virtues are the product of the Holy Spirit, which we have within us.

What is our responsibility in this fruit development? These virtues should be the natural result of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. But we do have helpful instruction directly from Jesus. On one occasion Jesus was speaking to His disciples and used this same imagery involving fruit production. Jesus was specifically talking about a vine and its branches.

(JOHN 15:4) In John's gospel #15 vv. 4 & 5 He said, **"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (JOHN 15:5) I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."** So the point is that we need to stay close to Jesus. We need to maintain a close relationship with Him. He has said that He is in us. So we need to listen to Him. We need to talk to Him. We need to read His word. We need to trust Him in our daily life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The product of this abiding in Jesus, this having the Holy Spirit in our lives is these nine virtues. We don't have time to analyze each one. But we should note that love is first on

the list. It is a key term in the two great commandments which Jesus cited. In v. 14 in our passage Paul pointed to the second great commandment about loving our neighbor. I suspect that it is this love for other people which Paul has in mind here as a fruit of the Spirit. Our culture tends to regard love as a feeling. But the Bible treats it primarily as an action, as an act of will. Jesus in John 3:16 said that God so loved the world that He gave His unique Son so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. That was love in action.

We recognize the basic meaning of the other eight virtues which follow. Then we find this comment that against such things there is no law. That statement is a bit puzzling. Perhaps the background for it is the Judaizers and the rabbis of first century Judaism who tried to regulate everything. They even criticized Jesus for healing people on the Sabbath.

Verse 24: **“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”** Paul says a similar thing in Romans #6 vv. 6 & 7. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 6:6-7) There he writes, **“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin.”**

Sin has not yet been totally eradicated from our lives. We still have a sin nature. But by virtue of our trust in Jesus, we have become identified with Him in His death and resurrection. The penalty for our sin has been paid, and the enslaving power of sin has been removed. We don't have to be bound to sin. We have the freedom and power not to sin.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Paul adds in v. 25, **“If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.”** I was talking with a fellow runner in town this week who puts in a lot of miles. He says that he always listens to music on his headphones. He says that he regards himself as running to the music. That is kind of the idea that Paul has in mind here. We are to tune in to His direction in our lives. We are to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us in the daily situations that we encounter. We are to run to His music.

Finally, Paul writes in v. 26, **“Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”** Perhaps Paul has a particular situation in mind among the Galatians. Perhaps there are factions which are developing in regard to the Judaizers and their desire to have Christians follow the law. But then also there is a danger among Christians that we can become competitive and proud even in regard to the spiritual fruit which we may have. Conceit and envy can be an insidious thing. But Paul's main point is that loving service requires walking by the Spirit. We Christians can enjoy a real freedom in life, but we will enjoy it the most when we live in dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

Dean was kind of like the dog who ran wild. He was born in the Bible belt in Alabama in 1931. He grew up in a Christian home, but he didn't want to have anything to do with

Biblical restrictions in his life. He served in the Navy during the Korean War. After that Dean experienced some success as a DJ and a singer. He was drawn toward southern California and looked for acting and singing opportunities. He told an interviewer, **“My first scene in a movie was with James Cagney, for goodness sakes. There I was, just out of the U. S. Navy without an acting lesson to my name. In walks Cagney and says ‘Walk to your mark and remember your lines.’ That’s all I’ve been doing for fifty years.”**

Bigger acting opportunities came along. He started making big money. **“I was making \$50,000 a week. I had the Ferrari and beautiful women and all the rest of what I thought would satisfy my life. And it was empty. Really empty.”**

He continued to run free and wild. His marriage ended in divorce. He ran around with a lot of women. He drank a lot. Then he had a car accident when he was under the influence and almost died. He says that he cried out to God at that point: **“I’ve done everything in this world I thought would make me happy and it doesn’t work. I have everything and I have nothing. I have no choice but to believe. [God, if] you don’t exist, then I’m a dead man.”** (Breakpoint, 9/18/2015) But Dean believed in Jesus, and he says that supernatural peace flooded his soul.

This Dean was Dean Jones. He continued to pursue an acting career. But he approached it with an entirely different attitude. He did it to serve God. He experienced a new life and a new freedom. One of the roles that he took on was playing Chuck Colson in the movie version of *Born Again*. Dean Jones passed away in 2015, having tasted something of what the Christian life was intended to be. That kind of life is available to us if we put our trust in Jesus and seek to walk by the Spirit.