

Legalism, License, and True Liberty!
Galatians 5:13-15
Series: No Other Gospel - #20

Introduction: Take your Bibles and join me in Galatians 5, Galatians chapter 5.

“Give me liberty, or give me death!” Those are the famous words of Patrick Henry as he called his own countrymen to join him in the fight for national freedom. And they are also words which seem to appropriately represent the spirit of mankind of almost any age. Liberty is a most valued possession, and the most misunderstood and poorly defined concepts in any age. So there is an ancient Greek proverb which says – “the free man is one who lives as he chooses.”¹ Now – that is some kind of freedom – absolutely no one telling him what to do. He can live unto his own pleasure and choice. We have seen this in our own country with seemingly increasing frequency. So, in the 1960’s the mantra was “free love.” Which ended up to be neither free nor love as people gave themselves to whatever they desired and found out that it was bondage and not freedom. And now this has blossomed in our sin-cursed world into a generation who wants to throw off all restraining forces and get rid of all authority so that everyone everywhere is allowed to do whatever they want whenever they want to do it and we all have to not only be okay with that, but we have to support and celebrate that – and all of that is under the guise of freedom! This is the dangerous side of liberty. People think that it means I can live however I want and no one can tell me otherwise. Well, that is dangerous and deadly to a nation whose foundation is a moral fiber that is quickly eroding, but it is all the more dangerous to a church who is tempted to entertain the use of their liberty in Christ as the opportunity to live out all their fleshly desires. And this is a very real and present danger for the church.

In Galatians 5 we have seen the churches of Galatia warned in no uncertain terms about the damage that legalism would cause to their perseverance in grace. Remember that these legalistic false teachers were calling them to accept the outward works of the Law – particularly the act of circumcision – as necessary to be truly saved before God. The issue was justification. How were they going to be declared right and righteous before God on Judgment Day? Was it going to be because they had done certain works of their own self-righteous effort? This is what the legalists were calling them to. Not to abandon Christ altogether, but to add to Christ. To more firmly secure their eternal right standing before God by doing deeds of their own self-righteousness. What Paul has made clear to them is that if they seek to be justified before God and declared sinless and in an eternally right standing with the Thrice Holy God through some act of law keeping, then they must know that they are now obligated to keep the whole Law. This is why legalism is so dangerous. It is a man-centered and man-dependent attempt to earn eternal life.

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians; Reformed Expository Commentary*, pg. 217.

But it cannot deliver what it promises. The carrot that is dangled before the adherent to legalism is forever lost because man's righteousness is as filthy rags before our Holy God. Paul is telling them that if they accept the legalistic standards of the false teachers, they are in jeopardy of falling away from grace.

But now in verses 13-15 he is going to make the point that license is just as dangerous as legalism. License is the attitude which says – hey, we are no longer under law, but now we are under grace, so we can live however we want. Legalism uses the Law as a stick to beat to people into their definition of a righteous life so as to earn salvation. But license uses grace and says that since I am saved by the free grace of God in Christ then I don't have to be concerned really with any laws of God that should govern my life. Legalism is an abuse of the Law's intention, whereas license is a disregard for the Law. Both of them are man-centered and flesh-driven, and both of them defame the character of the Law Giver himself and of the Law He gave. They both also do great damage to the true Gospel of Grace, and therefore to the church birthed out of the Gospel. So, with that introduction, let's read the text of Galatians 5:13-15.

The first phrase in verse 13 sets the stage for these 3 verses. We have been called to freedom in Christ. This has been the theme of Paul's letter up to this point, and especially of the last 30 or so verses. We are free from the demands of the external Law of Moses because we have been re-born in Christ to new life by grace through faith. But Paul anticipates the argument of his opponents in Galatia – if there is no law hanging over someone's justification then how we live no longer matters and the Gospel of grace opens the door to all manners of fleshly living. So, Paul tackles that head on in these verses. His whole point is to call believers to walk in the true freedom which we have in Christ. This means that there is a false freedom which is also associated with Christ. So, we are simply going to look at the false freedom in this text and then at the true freedom.

I. False Freedom – vs. 13a

- a. This false freedom is described quite clearly in verse 13. The truth of being free in Christ gives impetus to the following commands in verse 13. The first command is the negative one. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. This negative command is quickly coupled with the positive command – but through love serve one another. In other words, being free in Christ from the demands of the Law as a means to earning our salvation has an inherent danger and it has an immense opportunity. The inherent danger is that we would take this freedom and use it for fleshly indulgence. And the immense opportunity is that we would actually know the true freedom of serving others in love. One is a false freedom and one is a true freedom. The false freedom is obviously the dangerous one.
- b. This false freedom is when we use our freedom in Christ as an opportunity for the flesh. The word in the original for “opportunity” was sometimes used in military contexts which used the word to describe a vantage point or a base of operations from which an army would launch an attack. The strategic spot was chosen because of the advantage it gave to the offensive army. This is what your flesh wants to do with your freedom in Christ. Your flesh wants to rejoice in the

finished work of Christ in that He kept the whole Law on your behalf and then he took your sin upon himself to die in your place. And then your flesh wants to make that truth a launching off point into all kinds of self-pleasing activities. The thought process goes something like this – Well, I am no longer under the Law as my ruling authority, and my sins are all forgiven in Christ, so I don't really have to be all that concerned about how I now live. And this comes out in situations like when you are driving and the speed limit is 55 and your wife notices that you are driving 65, and you look at her and say – don't worry honey, we are not under law anymore, but we are under grace. That is a silly example, but it displays our fleshly tendency to abuse the freedom of the Gospel by acting like sin no longer matters because Jesus cleansed us from it all anyways. It is illustrated by a re-wording of an old hymn that goes like this – “Free from the Law, O blessed condition, I can sin as I please and still have remission.”

- c. This is the chorus of the antinomian – which simply means the one who is anti-Law. He has abandoned all calls of God to obedience and holiness because he is abusing his liberty in Christ to be freed from the penalty of sin. It is similar to what Paul counters in Romans 6 when he says, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid!” This is what the man of license does with grace. He actually thinks it makes grace more glorious if he downplays any responsibility he has to live in light of God's commands found in the Scriptures. He thinks that any attempt to live in an obedient way to God smells of legalism, and there is nothing more heinous to Mr. License than legalism, or at least, what they would define as legalism. What this leads to is a using of his supposed freedom in Christ as a springboard for his fleshly lusts. His sin quickly capitalizes on the opportunity that his poor theology has created and soon he finds himself abounding in sin and rejoicing that grace will all the more abound.
- d. The deceit of this way of thinking and living is found when you understand that this is not true freedom at all. The freedom Christ has set us free to is not a freedom which liberates us to continue in and abound in sin. If it were that kind of freedom it would be a freedom that would be entirely unnecessary. It would be unnecessary because before we ever came to Christ in faith, we had that kind of freedom. Our flesh was free to act out any passion or lustful desire it ever had because in sin there was no constraint on our behavior. We did not need Christ to go to the Cross to liberate us so that we could be freed in a way in which we were already free. Christ did not die to free us to sin, but rather, He died to free us from sin. So, in Christ, we are liberated from sin's penalty – He paid it so that we will never have to. And in Christ we are liberated from sin's power – because sin has been defeated by Jesus we can no say no to sin when it beckons us to follow its path. And in Christ we will one day be liberated from sin's presence. What the man of license does is he takes that liberty in Christ from the penalty of sin and he lives there, rather than taking it to the next level of living in light of being liberated from the power of sin in Jesus.

- e. I don't know of any Christians who say that this is how they intend to live. I have never had someone tell me that they intend to abound in sin because they know that they are forgiven in Christ. But I have seen many who practice this type of practical theology without ever calling it what it really is.
- f. So, for instance, many professing Christians in our day and age would talk about the self-acceptance that is in the gospel – or at least in their version of the gospel. So, they say – God has accepted me just the way I am and He loved me so much that he even sent His Son to die for me on the Cross so that he could save me. And since God accepts me the way I am then I should not be straightjacketed by some Law of God. God simply wants me to be myself. Where this eventually leads then is that if you don't accept me as I am then you are obviously not being loving to me because you are not being like God who has accepted me as I am. You see, it all sounds so gracey and so good, but in reality is a false gospel completely.
- g. God does not accept us as we are. God has loved us in spite of who we are. While we were his enemies He loved us by giving His very own Son for us. We can only be accepted by Him if we are in Christ and he only accepts us for Christ's sake. Part of being in Christ is that we are completely reborn and given a new nature – old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new.
- h. Another example of this antinomian gospel – the grace gives me license to continue in my sin – is found in those who tout their liberty in Christ as the trump card to any other Christian's concern about their choices and behavior. So, for instance, Sally decides that she wants to move in with her boyfriend because it would make so many things so much easier. After she makes the move one of the other members from her church finds out and talks to her to see what is going on. As her friend lovingly questions and eventually confronts her with the truth of God's Word about purity before marriage and avoiding making any provision for the flesh, Sally responds with something like – “Well, thanks for your concern, but this is really none of your business. I don't need to be beaten into submission by your Miss Holier Than Thou standards and I especially don't need my relationship with God called into question by you. I know that some of what I am doing might not be the best, but I also know that God is full of grace and forgiveness and there is just so much that is right about all of that I just can't see how it is wrong.
- i. Again, this is not the true freedom of the Gospel in practice. Sally has believed herself to be free in Christ to make a choice which directly contradicts the Word of Christ. And the thing that has convinced that this is okay is that she knows God is gracious and forgiving and it will all turn out in the end. This is a dangerously false gospel.
- j. It is not freedom at all, but actually slavery. Jesus says it this way in John 8:34 “Truly, Truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” If you think that freedom in Christ is a spiritual trampoline which launches you into all kinds of expressions of the lusts of your flesh, you are deceived. This is not freedom at all, but ongoing slavery to sin.

- k. So, if false freedom is thinking that my liberty in Christ liberates me to walk in the flesh, then what does true freedom look like for the believer.
- II. **True Freedom – vs. 13b-14**
- a. That is what is explained at the end of verse 13 and on into verse 14. The negative command against false freedom is followed by the positive command to walk in true freedom. The text says, “but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”
- b. True freedom in Christ then is found in the freedom to lovingly serve one another. Notice the context of the church in the command. This is found in the phrase “one another.” As Paul writes to the church as a whole he is calling them to true freedom in Christ which will be expressed and experienced first within the context of the body. They are no longer a group of people who are seeking their justification before God through the accomplishment of good works of the Law. But rather they have been freed in Christ from this works based system. And here’s the deal – when you are in a works based system of salvation you are focused on good works for your own end. The good works you do might look good on the outside as though they somehow served someone else, but in reality your heart is motivated to do these good things for your own benefit as you try to earn your salvation. In that way you are not loving anyone else other than yourself.
- c. But in Christ we have been freed from this. Jesus came and lived in perfect obedience to the Law – earning our righteous standing before the Father for all of eternity – and then he willingly and lovingly took our sins upon himself on the Cross so that in Christ our sin debt is paid and our absence of righteousness is filled up by His righteousness. So now, when the believer in Jesus truly grasps the ramifications of this exchange – my sin on Jesus and His righteousness on me – then he is freed from any thought of self-justification. I don’t need to be good in order to convince God to make me His child – that is taken care of in Christ. But, as we just learned – that does not mean that I am free to not be good at all and just continue in sin. No, now I am freed in Christ to walk in true love for others by serving them in every way. Instead of being slave to the law so as to earn salvation, now I am free in Christ to be slave to others as I serve them in love. And that is what is behind the word for serve – it is the Greek word for slave – “doulos.” Instead of being slaves of sin by continuing in sin – as Christ said in John 8 – we are now freed in Christ to be slaves to others – and particularly to be slaves to others in the body of Christ.
- d. This is God’s pattern throughout the Scriptures by the way. He frees people from bondage so that they can serve others. So, just to hit some highlights from the Scriptures – think of Joseph in the book of Genesis. He was imprisoned by his brothers and then sold into slavery in Egypt and then imprisoned in Egypt under the guise of a false accusation, but God eventually liberated him and redeemed him and then exalted him to a high position through supernatural means. Why did God do this? Well, he freed Joseph so as to use Joseph to serve others. He served the people of Egypt by managing the harvest of the years of plenty so as to

be ready for the years of drought. And then he served the peoples of the world by selling grain to them during the seven years of famine. And eventually God used him to serve his own family when they came seeking food in Egypt. What man meant for evil, God truly meant for good as he used Joseph to serve others by freeing him from his bonds.

- e. Then, think of the children of Israel. They were in bondage in Egypt for 400 years and then when God miraculously freed them, he told them explicitly that they had been freed so that they could serve God in the Promised Land as His chosen people. So, for instance, in Exodus 20 before God gives them the 10 core commandments of His Law he tells them that he has freed them from the slavery of Egypt – therefore they should serve and love Him in these ways. He freed them from an evil master to liberate them to serve Him.
- f. Then think of the apostle Paul himself. Once enslaved to the Pharisaical system of earning a right standing with God through works of obedience to the Law, he was then freed in Christ and the course of his whole life changed. He went from persecutor and pride-filled zealot to chief servant of the church. He gave his life for the work of God in service to the church as he took the Gospel to places that had never been reached. What changed him? The liberating power of Christ and His grace. He was saved and now he was free to serve. Paul did not go deep into sin because of his liberty, but he went deep into sacrificial and loving service because of his liberty.
- g. And then, think ultimately of Jesus himself. He was not enslaved to sin or to anyone else's authority over Him. In fact, there has never been a more free man to walk the face of the planet. He was the ultimate authority over all things. He was technically not the slave of anything. And yet, he willingly humbled himself to become servant of all. In fact, there is no greater or more complete servant than Christ himself. He was such a slave to others that in love he served them to the point of death, even the cross-kind of death!
- h. So, brothers and sisters – are we any different than this? Should our freedom in Christ be used any differently than Christ used His own freedom? We have been set free in Christ for the purpose of serving others through love. That is true freedom beloved!
- i. Verse 14 expands on this explanation of true freedom in Christ in what I found to be a surprising way as I studied the text. I've read these words hundreds of times, but this week I was freshly struck by verse 14 and all of its implications. Before we get into it, I must tell you that I have fretted quite a bit about how to explain this all to you. There is so much to say about the Law of God and the Christian, so I am dependent on the Spirit of God to help us in the moments ahead to give you what you need to know today, and then I trust that God will continue to instruct all of us about this as we continue to study His Word together.
- j. Verse 14 lets us know that if we walk in the true freedom we have in Christ and through love serve one another, then we are fulfilling the whole law. This is true because the whole law is summarized in one word, which is quoted from Leviticus 19:18 – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You know that

command – it is the second part of the great command that Jesus gave us in Matthew 22. It is strikingly similar to the golden rule that Jesus stated in Matthew 7:12. And it is repeated throughout the New Testament in places like Romans and James, and here in Galatians. The Law is fulfilled in this one word – love your neighbor as yourself. This is not a call to self-love as the basis for love for others. No, we all naturally take care of ourselves and have our own interests in the front of our minds all the time. God is giving you the train tracks for your train to run on here. You know the tracks of loving yourself – you do it all the time. The desire of God is for you to love others in that same way.

- k. This is not a minimalistic summary of the Law – as though somehow this is boiling the whole law down to the only thing that matters. But rather, this is a maximizing summary of the whole law. Rather than give us an infinite number of commands to memorize which would cover every possible scenario of life – God gives us a principle to follow and apply in every circumstance of life. If we follow this principle then we will fulfill His Law. If you love your neighbor as you love yourself then you will fulfill the Law of God in every circumstance.
- l. Now, here is the difficult thing to understand. How does this fit in with being freed from the Law in Christ? So, Paul has belabored this point throughout this letter – the Law is not over you like a club beating you into submission so as to help you earn your salvation before God. No, you are free by grace through faith in Christ from the Law's demands upon your soul to earn your salvation. But, what I have often heard, and have probably carelessly said, is that the New Testament believer is free from the Law of God in Christ. What that has turned into is a form of antinomianism in which the Law is shucked as though it is some antiquated slave master that was overrun and finally defeated in Christ. But what verses 13-14 teach us is that our freedom in Christ is not from the law of God in every way. Our freedom from the Law is a freedom from Law keeping as the path to earn our righteous standing before God. We are completely unable to do this, and this is why Christ came. The Law was an external code which called us to obedience which we as humans were unable to perform. So Christ came to do for us, what we could not do for ourselves. What these verses teach us is that now that Christ has settled the justification issue by being our righteousness, we are now born again by the Spirit of God and the Law code of God is written on our hearts and we are born along by the power of the Spirit to keep the moral Law of God from our hearts. What this will look like is loving our neighbor as ourselves in every situation. What this is dependent on is walking in the Spirit – which is what we will explore over the next 2 Sundays. So, our freedom in Christ is not an absolution of the Law in every way, but rather it is a freedom to now truly obey the law from the heart. Consider this explanation from Romans 8:
 - i. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has **set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death**. ³ For God has done what the law, **weakened by the flesh**, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ **in**

order that the righteous requirement of the law might be **fulfilled in us**, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:1-4 ESV, emphasis added)

- m. The Law is not the problem – our sinful flesh is the problem. That is why Christ came – to live in obedience to the Law because we couldn't. And don't think that Christ lived in obedience to the law in a begrudging kind of way. He didn't simply endure it as though it was something to be tolerated, but rather, he willingly and joyfully obeyed every jot and tittle of the Law of God as the beloved Son who was pleased to walk in obedience to the heart of the Father. Through Christ, our sin has been condemned in the flesh – so that we might walk every moment of every day – not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. And if we do that, we will fulfill the righteous requirement of the law.
- n. I don't have time to develop this, but there are three aspects to the law – and I am well aware of how this view has fallen on hard times lately – but I am more convinced than ever that this is true of the Law of God in the Old Testament. There are three aspects to the law – the ceremonial, the civil, and the moral. The ceremonial and civil aspects of the Law were given to a specific people for a specific time so as to make them unique and different as a witness to the nations around them. They were also given for a specific time frame, which was to be until the Messiah came. Then the shadow of these parts of the Law would give way to the full reality and fulfillment of them in Christ. So, for instance, the command to sacrifice animals for the sin offering was never sufficient in itself to pardon the sinner, but it foreshadowed and expressed the faith of the worshiper that in some future day God was going to provide a “once for all” kind of sacrifice that this continual sacrifice was pointing ahead to. Therefore, we no longer practice that part of the Law of God because as Hebrews makes so plain – Jesus is the supreme “once for all” sacrifice that has been given. The shadow is no longer necessary because the full light of Jesus has come!
- o. But that does not mean that we now get rid of all of the Law of God as it relates to the life of the Christian. The center of God's law – the nucleus around which everything else orbits – the moral aspect of God's law – is still pertinent to those of us who are in Christ. In fact, it is written on your very heart by the Spirit of God. You are now able, because of union with Christ, to set aside legalistic law keeping and license driven flesh indulgence, so that you can now truly fulfill God's Law to love your neighbor as yourself. The moral law of God has also been fulfilled by and in Christ, but that does not make it obsolete. Rather, it gives us the freedom to walk in similar ways. We are now liberated to obey God by sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others as we seek to walk by the Spirit's power in obedience to God's Word.
- p. Is this not what Jesus told his disciples so often – if you love me you will keep my commandments! This is not legalistic talk by Jesus, this is exactly what Galatians 5:13-14 is calling us to – to walk each moment in the freedom we have in Christ which will look like obedience to God as we serve one another in love. Isn't this what Jesus said in John 13 would identify His church? He said they would be

known by love for one another. Why? Because they have been freed from legalistic law keeping and from license-driven fleshly lusts, so now they can truly serve one another in love.

- q. Let me summarize this with a quote from Sinclair Ferguson. Here is how he responds to the Law shucking attitude of the antinomian:
 - i. “. . . the deepest response to antinomianism is not ‘You are under the law’ but rather – You are despising the gospel and failing to understand how the grace of God in the gospel works! There is no condemnation for you under the law because of your faith-union with Christ. But that same faith-union leads to the requirements of the law being fulfilled in you through the Spirit. Your real problem is not that you do not understand the law. It is that you do not understand the gospel. For Paul says that we are ‘in-lawed to Christ.’ Our relationship to the law is not a bare legal one, coldly impersonal. No, our conformity to it is the fruit of our marriage to our new husband Jesus Christ.”²
- r. My observation is that many of us have a long way to go in truly understanding this side of the Gospel. We are freed in Christ to truly fulfill the Law of Christ – which is to bear one another’s burdens as we through love serve one another.

III. The Test – vs. 15

- a. Let me quickly end by pointing you to verse 15. I think verse 15 is a litmus test for the Christian to see if they are walking in legalism or license rather than in the true liberty of Christ. It is a verse of contrast from walking in love toward one another which is described in verses 13-14. Verse 15 says – “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” These are animal like descriptions of conflict within the church. Think of a pack of wolves that teams up on its prey. They bite and pick at it until they can conquer and overcome it and then they devour it and consume it. This is what legalism and license both lead to in the body of Christ. If we have a legalistic worldview and bent then we will constantly compare ourselves with others to see how we are stacking up in our righteousness. This will instantly make us judgmental of others and forgiving of ourselves. We will see the worst in everyone else and the best in us. We will begin to bite at others in the body by picking apart how they don’t match up to our standard of righteous living and therefore must obviously not be as pleasing to God as we are. Legalism destroys the unity of the church by leading us to bite and devour one another and eventually consume one another. How many a church split can be attributed to legalistic hearts!
- b. On the other hand, the attitude of license lands us in the same spot, and therefore proves to be just as dangerous to the body of Christ as legalism is. License teaches me that I can do whatever I want to do and no one can tell me otherwise. And so, like Sally in our previous illustration, we become self-consumed in defending our so-called Christian liberty and we are ready to go to battle stations to fight anyone who would try to tell us that holy living actually does matter in the

² Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, pg. 153-154.

Christian life. And so, in defense of our freedom we set aside love for one another and we bite and devour one another. How many a church split has happened because of the divisive spirit of license!

Conclusion: So, beloved, I call you to examine your attitude toward the body this morning. Use the truth of verse 15 as a litmus test of your heart attitude. Do you hold to legalism or to license? How would you know? Well, one clear and obvious sign would be your relationship to the others of this body. Are you judgmental and cantankerous? Are you always looking for ways to critique your brothers and sisters? Are your words filled with self-exalting statements of how you are better than others? Or with self-promoting statements in the form of putting others down because they don't measure up? Are you constantly defensive about how others view your expressions of liberty and your actions? Are you most concerned in the body with proving that you have the right to live in the way you are so as to silence your critics? These, and many more, are signs of a heart of legalism and license – and they are both deadly toxins within the church. Beloved, we have been saved for better. We have been freed in Christ so that through love we can serve one another! Let's pray!