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The Letter to the Galatians—Fall 2013 Shared Ministry Study
Session 5 (Galatians 5:1-26)—October 1, 2013

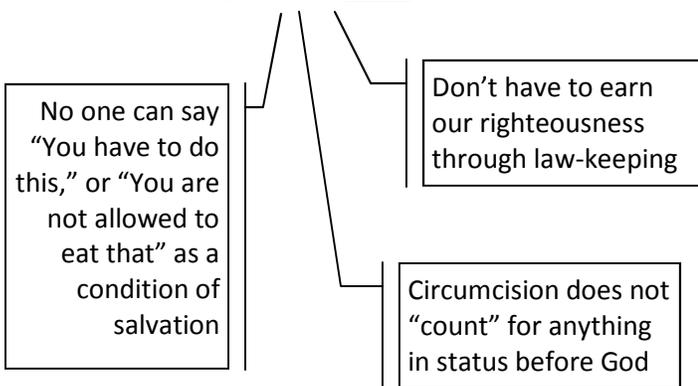


Galatians 5:1-15—Freedom From, Freedom For

The Christian life is all about *freedom*. The trouble is, on our own, we don't have a very full picture of what *freedom* really means. Paul spends the first half of chapter 5 fleshing out a full understanding of freedom, so that we don't end up misusing or misapplying his teaching of a gospel of radical grace. To put it simply, there is both *negative* freedom (what I don't have to do any longer), and there is *positive* freedom (what I can do now that I am free). Without both halves, we end up with a stunted picture of what it means to be free.

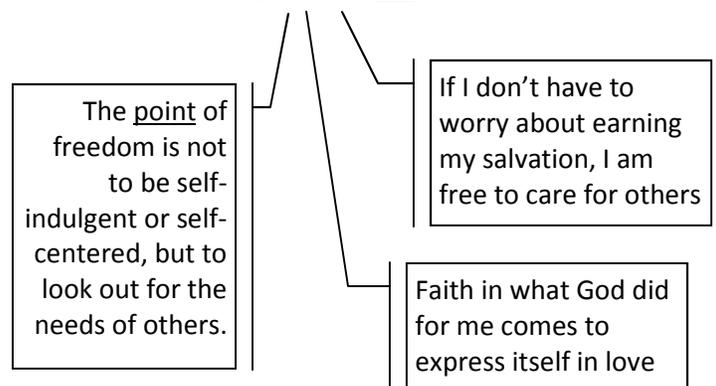
Negative Freedom

(freedom from)



Positive Freedom

(freedom for)



Now, going along with all of this discussion of *negative* and *positive* freedom is one more appeal from Paul about why trying to add circumcision (*or anything else*) to the Gospel is a losing proposition. Once you add circumcision as a requirement for acceptance by God, you are "obliged to obey the whole law," and we are constantly failing at other points of the Law. The Judaizers who have come to Galatia keep wanting to say, "Yes, take all that Paul told you about Jesus, but just add this one more requirement—you have to be circumcised (*if you are male, obviously*) and then make a start at keeping the Law." But Paul says, the rest of that whole Law is a ruthless, unforgiving taskmaster—if you fail at one point, you bear responsibility for breaking the whole thing. And so, Paul says, if you try to play the game by rule-keeping, you are rejecting the free gift of grace. "Christ will be of no benefit to you," because you are convinced that you have to earn what God has been giving away for free. Paul knows his message of Christ's cross alone will get him into trouble with others, but he is convinced the gospel is worth it.

- Where have you seen the difference between "negative" freedom and "positive" freedom in your own life?
- What do we lose if we only have the "negative" half? What are the dangers there?

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Sidebar: Paul and the PG-13 Rating

Generally speaking, Paul encourages Christians to watch their words and their actions so as not to scandalize others (see 1 Cor. 8:9-13, Col. 3:8, and Eph. 5:4). But in Gal. 5:12, Paul himself uses a rather coarse figure of speech aimed at the Judaizers to make his point. Since the Judaizers are the ones who want to impose circumcision on Gentile believers, Paul says, in effect, “If they want to play by those rules, they are going to have to go all the way.” His argument in this passage is that if you start requiring circumcision, you are going to set people up to have to obey the whole law, which we can never fully keep. So Paul says, “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!”—in other words, “If you are going to insist on circumcision, you had better just cut the whole thing off!” So... why does Paul say this, and why call attention to it? For one, this helps make it clear for us that Paul takes these matters very seriously and very passionately—faith in Christ is not just a hobby or something for polite conversation, but a matter of real life and death. Second, hopefully we can see that the Bible is hardly milquetoast or bland—the Scriptures speak with real human voices, earthy imagery, and fierce passion by the Spirit. So before we assume we already know what the Bible says, here is a reminder to let it speak on its own terms.

Galatians 5:1-15, Continued—The Law of Love

Hopefully by the time we get to Galatians 5:13-15, we have now heard loud and clear the news that we are *freed from* the demands of the Law. But that isn’t the same as saying it doesn’t matter what we do. *(Paul seems to see this counter-argument coming, both here and famously in Romans 6:1-2, where Paul raises the question, “Should we continue in sin so that grace may abound?” and then answers, “By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”)* Paul can see that the message of **justification by grace through faith apart from works of the law** seems to leave itself open to being abused. *If we’re saved by grace and don’t have to live by the law, why can’t I just take whatever I want from everyone, live however I please, and do whatever I want?* No, Paul says, because the *point* of our freedom is for us to love one another, not because we are afraid of being punished or zapped if we don’t, but because that is what our freedom was *intended* for. Paul goes on to say that the whole intention of the Law all along was for us to *love* one another, too. This is an intriguing move, because Paul doesn’t beat up on the Law, but speaks positively as if to say, “The Law was given to help us be able to love one another, and that really is what God wants for us.” The problem with the Law, we have seen, was that it just wasn’t powerful enough to *make* us do what it said. But it was pointing in the direction of love for neighbor all along (so Paul quotes from Leviticus 19 about loving neighbor as self, and like Jesus, he says this commandment is the summary of the whole law). So if we are no longer enslaved to the Law and fearful of its punishments, we can use our energy to serve one another.

- One theologian asked the question this way: “What are you going to do, now that you don’t have to do anything?” What does the question mean? And what would Paul say is the answer?
- What are some examples of using one’s freedom “for self-indulgence” that we face?

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+ Galatians 5:16-26—Spirit and Flesh

First, we had better define our terms. Paul opens this section of the chapter with the exhortation, “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” All right, so... what does it mean to “live by the Spirit” and what does Paul mean by “flesh”? We need to take a time-out here, because these are words that get used differently by different biblical writers (and even sometimes by the same writer at different times). The thornier of the two is “flesh,” which can be used in a basically neutral way sometimes, simply to mean “physical body” (as in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us,”) or can be a reference to the limitations of our physical bodies without calling them *morally* bad (as when Jesus says, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak,”) or all the way to being used to mean “the mindset of sinful humanity, bent in on itself and away from God.” But notice—when “flesh” is being used in a negative sense, it is **not** saying that physical life is inherently bad or sinful. We have to make that distinction, because otherwise it could sound like Paul is saying that just having physical bodies is sinful, or that physical things like taste, touch, and smell are morally wrong. (*And that is both a heresy called Gnosticism, as well as sure-fire way to miss out on some wonderful things in life, like the taste of peaches or the smell of the rain.*)

- What does Paul seem to mean when he talks about living by “the flesh”? Is he saying that any physical need/want is automatically sinful (like, say, *hunger*)? What does he mean by *flesh* in this passage?

Once we get our terms straight and see that Paul is talking about two different driving principles for our lives—either living by the guidance of the Holy Spirit with God’s priorities and the way of life Jesus gave us, or living by our own self-interested, consumeristic wants and impulses—the rest of the chapter comes into focus. Paul is moving us into his answer to the question, “What will guide my life if I’m not fearfully enslaved to the Law?” and he is saying that there are really only two options: either we will be led by the Spirit, or we will slide into self-absorbed (sinful) gratification of whatever it is we want at the moment. From there, the two options, *flesh* and *Spirit*, become two very different ways of life. The lists in this part of the chapter, then, are meant to be held side by side as pictures of the two outcomes to each way of life. Either you will be ruled by your own desires and end up with the list of the “works” of the flesh in 5:19-21, or you end up with a life marked by the “fruit” of the Spirit, listed in 5:22-23. Paul says that if our lives are marked by the first list, it is a sign we aren’t really filled with the Spirit—the same Spirit who is a sign we are adopted children of God who cry “Abba! Father” (remember 4:6). But if our lives are marked by the second list, the “fruit of the Spirit,” we don’t have to worry about the Law anymore anyway, because “there is no law against such things” (5:23).

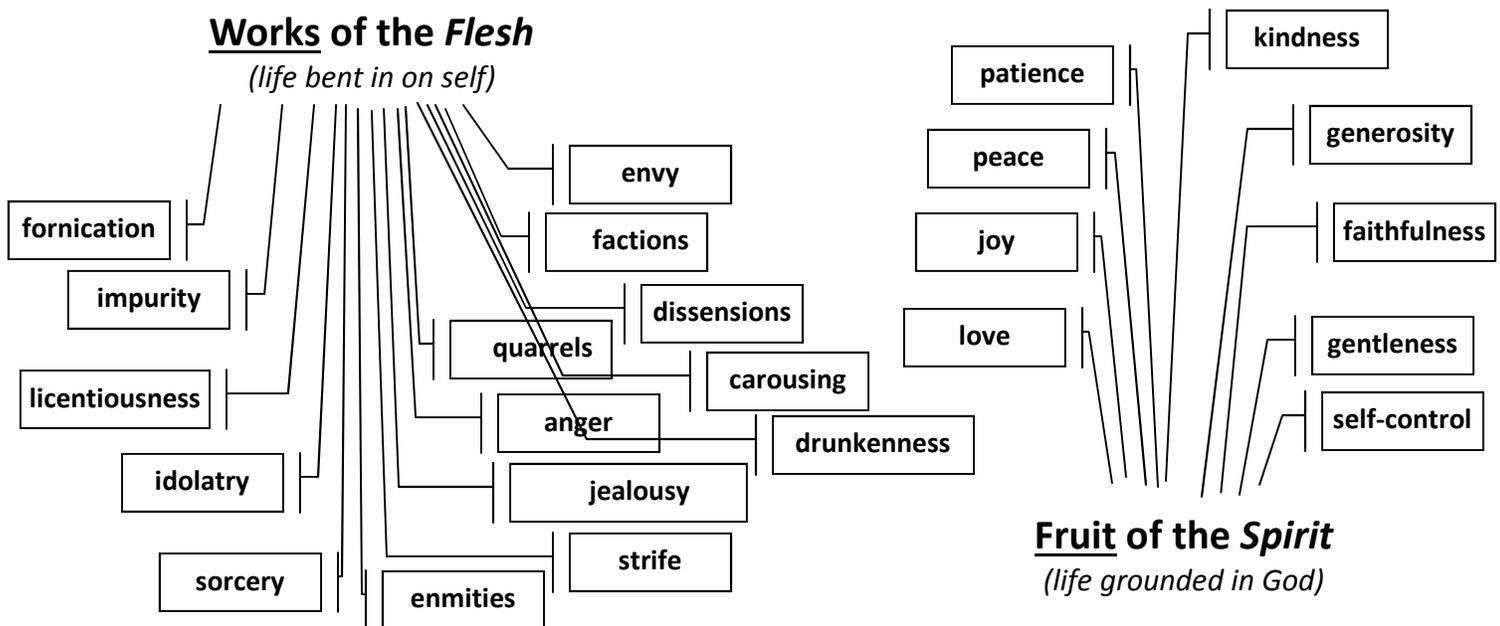
- Why do you suppose Paul refers to the hallmarks of the “flesh” as works, and the outcome of the “Spirit” as fruit? What is implied by the image/metaphor of “fruit”?
- How does it affect the way we understand the “fruit of the Spirit” list to hear it in context?

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+ Galatians 5:15-26, Continued—A Closer Look at the Two Ways

The list of sinful actions in 5:19-21 makes a different kind of sense when it is held up against the list of the “fruit of the Spirit” in 5:22-23. They might otherwise seem like just random collections of good and bad actions, but with them set side by side, it makes it clearer that Paul is describing two different ways of life. Which characterizes ours, Paul asks? Which do our lives look *more* like? That is a sign of whether we are still living to please ourselves and being ruled by our own crooked impulses, or whether we are living by the Spirit, who gives us a new will, a new heart, and a new capacity for love.



This isn't an *exhaustive* description of good or bad behaviors—they are sketches of two kinds of life, two orientations toward life. And notice, too, that the “works” of the flesh are in many cases specific actions or behaviors, while the “fruit” of the spirit are more like character traits or **virtues**. They become a part of who we *are*—and they *flow* from the indwelling of the Spirit in us. That helps to make it clear how to understand Paul's meaning in 5:21 that “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” If we are saved by grace, then how can my actions be a part of the equation? In context, it is clear that if the list on the left (the works of the flesh) are our way of life, we are showing that we are still driven by *self* rather than the Spirit. Notice Paul **doesn't** say that if you do all the good things on the “fruit of the Spirit” list, you earn God's love, but rather that if the other behaviors are your way of life, it is a sign that the Spirit is not animating or guiding your actions and your character. But the good fruit comes from the presence of the Spirit.

- What do you think Paul means when he talks about “crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires?”
- Does Paul mean that if you have done any of the things on the “flesh” list you are going to hell?