

Lesson 21 – Galatians 5:13-15

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Review/Introduction

The main point of Galatians is salvation is NOT by good works, moral living, religious ritual or observance, heredity, or organizational membership, but by **grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone!!!**

Paul is writing to the Galatian churches who are in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He is correcting the heresy of the Judaizers who are disturbing the Galatians with a different, distorted gospel, which is really not another since there is only one gospel of Christ.

Chapters 1 and 2

Paul begins in chapters 1 and 2 by presenting the authentication of the gospel through the source (God) and its power to change lives (persecutor/murderer to preacher; slave of sin to slave of Christ). That same authentication is true for the follower of Christ today.

Chapters 3 and 4

Paul defends justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He shows the things that the Law cannot do: bring about Spirit baptism (3:1-5); justify (3:6-9); deal with its own curse (3:10-14); set aside the previous covenant of promise (3:15-18); eliminate cultural, ethnic, racial, past religious, financial, or social distinctions; and overcome slavery (4:8-11). But the Law does take us by the hand and lead us to Christ (3:23-29).

Chapters 5 and 6

Having nailed down his argument for freedom in Christ through justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, Paul looks to the practical application of that freedom.

Imagine you move to a new community and you are looking for a new church. You visit a church, and you are given this as part of the expectations for members.

“Members shall not indulge in the world’s methods of pleasure seeking, amusements and entertainment, patronizing or taking part in fairs, parades, circuses, moving picture shows, theaters, drama, public bathing resorts, organized contesting ball teams, dancing, card parties, races, various forms of gambling, scavenger hunts, mystery suppers, hayrides and such like.” ... “Because of the effectiveness of the radio to propagate evil and increased end time deception, thereby destroying true spirituality in the home and church, its use is not permitted. Because of the evils of television, those who are responsible for the sale or use of the same forfeit their membership. Video cassette recorder (VCR) entertainment systems shall not be used. We likewise sense the dangers of the news media such as daily papers and magazines in the home (Psalm 101:3; Psalm 1:2).”

What do you think? Today, we look at legalism.

Practical Application of Justification – Freedom in Christ (5:13-15)

1. The sphere of freedom (5:13a)

¹³For you were called to freedom, brethren; (NASB95)

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers. (ESV)

Paul has “confidence in the Lord” that the Galatians “will adopt no other view” than the view of rejecting law/works or legalism in salvation (v10). Then starting in this sentence, he calls them “brethren”. They are fellow children of God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. They are fellow-believers, united in one family, united by the bond of affection derived from our relationship to Christ. Paul is not addressing the Judaizers now.

Paul previously said, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free” (5:1). He then went on to talk specifically about adding law/works to grace in regard to salvation, namely circumcision. Now it appears that he expands that idea from just salvation to all things legalistic. While clearly adding law/works to grace is legalism. Paul here addresses the brethren on an expanded definition of legalism. Since the context seems to focus on personal interactions (one another), this section has to do with using our liberty to either serve or harm the brethren.

❖ **How important are the brethren to you?**

We can define legalism as adding extra-biblical or out-of-context-biblical rules to ourselves or other believers that in some way move people closer to God. Adding rules to salvation (Christ plus anything – circumcision, baptism, etc.) is somewhat easy to discern.

However, it seems the most common practice of legalism is adding extra-biblical or out-of-context-biblical rules in order to define righteous or “more righteous” living. People may not believe they are saved by keeping those rules, but they believe keeping the rules makes you more holy, particularly holier than other people. Adhering to those rules or forcing those rules on others is legalism.

❖ **Do you apply rules to yourself or others about how to live that you think makes you holier than if you didn’t follow the rule (e.g., the kind of movies to watch, the kind of clothes to wear, etc.)?**

So, how do we define an area of freedom? An area of freedom is one in which the Bible does not provide a command, either in action or a prohibition. If the Bible commands it, then we are not “free” to do anything other than what our slavery to Christ demands which is obey. An example is that the Bible commands that the believer provide for his household (1 Timothy 5:8); an area of freedom is the career choice that you make. An example that the Bible commands is to marry only a believer (1 Corinthians 7:39); an area of freedom is the actual believer to marry.

In an area of freedom, how do we decide what to do? What should be that career choice? Whom should I marry? What vehicle should I buy? How do we make decisions in life (big or small)? Here is a recommended process.

1. Obey: In moral decisions (those commanded in Scripture) we must obey God. If it is prescribed in Scripture, the only decision to make is if we will obey or not.

❖ **What are some examples?**

2. Spirit Filling: Ensure that you have not bowed to other masters. If you have, repent and bow again before the Lord. You will be filled with the Spirit and exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit.
3. Wisdom: In non-moral decisions (those not prescribed in Scripture by a clear command), you have the freedom to make your own choice and the responsibility to use wisdom in making the choice. The choice is based on what you believe will best honor God in the situation you are placed.

Some decisions have multiple choices, any of which are acceptable to God. Yet, some decisions are wiser than others. In some decisions, part of the decision is a moral decision in which obedience is required and part is non-moral where wisdom is required (e.g., marriage). The application of wisdom in Scripture is seen in phrases like:

Acts 6:2 – “it is not desirable...”

Acts 15:22 – “it seemed good...”

1 Thess 3:1 – “we thought it best...”

Phil 2:25 – “But I thought it necessary...”

Titus 3:12 – “I have decided...”

We are commanded to apply wisdom to our walk.

¹⁵Therefore **be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise**, ¹⁶making the most of your time, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15-16)

❖ **Do you seek to make wise decisions?**

Wisdom is provided...

- By God

⁵But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

❖ **Do you ask God for wisdom?**

- Through research (Biblical for sure, e.g., Luke 14:28-32, but sometimes non-Biblical)

❖ **Do you carefully consider decisions?**

- Through wise council

²²Without consultation, plans are frustrated, But with many counselors they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22)

❖ **How are your decisions influenced by the company you keep?**

4. Trust: If we obey in moral decisions, walk in the Spirit, and make wise choices in non-moral decisions, then we humbly submit (a heart attitude of “if the Lord sovereignly wills”) ourselves to God’s sovereign will to work all things together for His glory and our sanctifying good.

²⁸And we know that **God causes all things to work together for good** to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

¹³Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." ¹⁴Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "**If the Lord wills**, we will live and also do this or that." ¹⁶But as it is, **you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.** (James 4:13-16)

²¹but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again **if God wills**," he set sail from Ephesus. (Acts 18:21)

¹⁹But I will come to you soon, **if the Lord wills**, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. (1 Corinthians 4:19)

⁵But I will come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; ⁶and perhaps I will stay with you, or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go. ⁷For I do not wish to see you now just in passing; for I hope to remain with you for some time, **if the Lord permits.** (1 Corinthians 16:5-7)

❖ **Do you submit to God’s sovereignty?**

It must be noted that it is up to each believer to apply these principles and cultivate their own convictions in areas of freedom. To force your own convictions on others is legalism.

2. Freedom constrained (5:13b-15)

^{13b}only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (NASB95)

^{13b}Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. (ESV)

The over-riding principle in Christian relationships with respect to non-moral issues (areas of freedom) is “through love service one another”. We are to exercise our freedom through making wise decisions where the Scriptures do not specifically speak. But we are “to not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh.”

“Opportunity” means to make a start from a place like a place from which an attack can be made. In context with the flesh (or inclination toward sin), it describes a place from which to start sinning.

As Americans, particularly, we have the temptation to think of freedom as our right. After all, it is a “free country”. We think we are free to live how we want, and it is up to others to bend to or put up with our freedom. For the believer, American or not, it is sin to use our freedom to please ourselves at others’ expense.

❖ **How “free” do you consider yourself?**

The opposite in Christian relationships of using freedom as an opportunity for the flesh is to “through love serve one another”.

“Love” is agape. It is the unconditional, sacrificial commitment of my will to another’s needs and best interests regardless of the cost to myself. Love seeks another’s highest good, even if it costs a great deal, even if there is no response of love or gratitude. Love is not an impulse from the feelings. It does not always run with the natural inclinations nor does it spend itself only upon those whom we like or deem worthy to receive love. It is an act of the will, so we can choose to love even if we do not feel like doing it.

“Serve” is derived from “slave”. It means to be in the position of a slave and act accordingly; to act or conduct oneself in total service to another. This service is a lifestyle and it’s a command. What does that mean? It means we need Spirit-filling to accomplish it.

❖ **When you look to exercise your freedom, is the most important thing your freedom or the service of the brethren?**

So how does this play out? In non-moral areas, decisions in which we have freedom, Christians can disagree. Sometimes, Christians believe they would be sinning if they made a certain choice within an area of freedom. Paul describes how Christians are to treat each other in these situations in Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8 using 1st century examples.

Romans 14-15 describes a person who is “weak in faith”. A “weak” brother (or sister) is a Christian who, because of the weakness of his faith and conscience or lack of knowledge, can be influenced to sin against his conscience by the example of a differing “not-weak” brother.

²²The **faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.** Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith; and **whatever is not from faith is sin.** (Romans 14:21-23)

⁷However **not all men have this knowledge**; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat *food* as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. ⁸But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. ⁹But **take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak**. ¹⁰For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, **will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened** to eat things sacrificed to idols? (1 Corinthians 8:7-10)

²⁹I mean **not your own conscience, but the other man's**; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? ³⁰If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? (1 Corinthians 10:29-30)

The “weak” brother is a Christian who has placed restrictions on himself beyond what God’s word says because he would violate his conscious by partaking in the activity. Each person must be fully convinced in their own mind that what they are doing is right (Romans 14:5).

A “not-weak” brother is a Christian who, because of his understanding of Biblical freedom and the strength of his conviction, exercises his liberty with full peace of conscience without being improperly influenced by the differing opinions of others.

The difficulty comes when a “weak” brother does not recognize they are “weak” and when a “not-weak” brother does not understand liberty’s constraints. Also, a “weak” brother is probably not “weak” in all areas of freedom.

❖ Do you understand the Bible’s definition of yourself in areas of liberty?

So, how are the “weak” and “not-weak” to interact and treat each other?

Those who are “not-weak” in faith are to accept the one who is “weak” in faith (Romans 14:1). “Accept” means to receive in one’s circle of fellowship with friendliness and kindness. But we don’t treat them nice so to judge their opinions.

Also, the “not-weak” are not to regard with contempt the “weak”. “Regard with contempt” means to regard as nothing, to despise utterly, to look down upon and even to treat with scorn or ridicule. The “not-weak” bear a lot of responsibility in these body relationships.

The “weak” on the other hand are not to judge the “not-weak” as being less spiritual or less holy or less mature.

¹Now **accept** the one who is weak in faith, *but not for the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions. ²One person has faith that he may eat all things (not-weak), but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*. ³The one who eats (not-weak) is **not to regard with contempt** the one who does not eat (weak), and the one who does not eat (weak) is **not to judge** the one who eats (not-weak), for God has accepted him. (Romans 14:1-3 with explanation)

❖ Do you accept or regard with contempt the “weak” or judge the “not-weak”?

The one who is “not-weak” is to **determine** to not put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way (14:13). A stumbling block would be to exercise freedom and thereby move a “weak” brother to do something that violates his conscience.

¹³Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather **determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.** (Romans 14:13)

If believers are together and one or some are “weak”, the “not-weak” brother(s) must limit their freedom out of love (14:15).

¹⁵For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then we **pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.** ²⁰Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. ²¹**It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.** (Romans 14:15-21)

Through love serving one another means self-limitation in order to not put a stumbling block before a brother. It is bearing the weakness of others, placing them before ourselves (Romans 15:1-2). We are to act for our neighbor’s good, for his building up.

¹Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. ²Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. (Romans 15:1-2)

❖ **Do you put stumbling blocks in brothers’ way?**

❖ **Do you easily self-limit your freedoms out of love?**

Here is the statement from the VBC website on one of our distinctives “Freedom given on non-moral issues”.

One distinctive of our church is what does not exist. We seek to strictly adhere to what the Bible specifically calls sin or that which necessarily violates biblical principles. This means there are no written or unwritten rules outside of the Bible that governs appropriate conduct.

Indeed, we consider such additions to the Scripture to lead toward legalism and become destructive to developing mature believers. Like the Pharisees in the New Testament, legalists develop a form of religion that emphasizes the external life. Jesus warned us to beware of this (Matthew 16:11-12).

It is important for the church to be healthy by giving freedom to people where the Scripture gives freedom. How each Christian chooses to live their lives in seeking to apply God's wisdom is important to the process of maturity.

What a great way to be healthy spiritually individually and corporately.

Let's work through an example – tattoos.

1. What is commanded? (Romans 8:2) What does that mean?
2. Are you walking in the Spirit or the flesh?
3. Where might you find wisdom?
 - a. Have you prayed for wisdom?
 - b. Have you looked into the Scriptures for wisdom?
 - Will the decision glorify God? (1 Cor 10:31)
 - Can I thank God in the decision? (1 Thess 5:16-18)
 - Will the decision cause a hindrance to the Gospel? (1 Cor 9:12)
 - Will this decision lead me into sin? (Rom 13:14)
 - Can I make the decision with a clear conscience? (Rom 14:22-23)
 - Is the decision profitable? (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23-24)
 - Will the decision master me? (1 Cor 6:12)
 - Will the decision cause my brother or sister to stumble? (Rom 14:21; 1 Cor 8:13)
 - Will the decision build up or tear down? (Rom 15:1-2; 14:19)
 - Is the decision worth imitating? (1 Cor 11:1)
 - Does the decision fit the Philippians 4:8 pattern?
 - c. Have you sought appropriate wise counsel?
4. Do you trust the God's character?

❖ Are you following the Biblical pattern for decision making?

While we are free from the Law, it does not mean we have absolute liberty. We are constrained by love. We are to “through love serve one another”. Paul restates this constraint here which Jesus had stated.

¹²“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

³⁴But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. ³⁵One of them, a lawyer, asked Him *a question*, testing Him, ³⁶“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the great and foremost commandment. ³⁹The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

Paul says the same thing several years later in Romans.

⁸Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. ⁹For this, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the* law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Oh, and by the way, if you are concerned about the Law, then you need to understand that love is the fulfillment of the Law.

❖ **Does love permeate your interactions in the body?**

The result of not loving, particularly in areas of freedom, is destructive to the body.

“Bite and devour” were used together to describe wild animals or dogs. The imagery is savage, snarling, vicious attacking. A lack of love in interactions on non-moral issues by not accepting, by regarding with contempt, or by judging is like vicious, attacking animals. The picture is not limited to two animals, but also a pack. Before you know it, animals are dead. Body relationships are not to be so.

“Take care” can mean beware or take heed or to discern. It takes vigilance to ensure the body is not torn asunder by legalism.

❖ **Are you taking care? Do thoughts like “I can’t believe that person does that” enter your mind”?**

Summary

The Galatians were in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Paul expands his teaching on legalism in salvation to legalism in areas of Christian freedom (or liberty). We are called to serve one another through love, taking care that we are not destroying body relationships by legalistic tendencies.

Additional Study

1. Read Galatians through in one sitting?
2. Evaluate your convictions and see if there are areas where you are a “weak”.
3. Do you extend your convictions onto other people?
4. Do you follow the non-moral decision-making process?
5. In what ways are you through love serving the brethren?
6. Are you “biting and devouring” the brethren (even if it is in your mind)?