

Galatians 5:13-21 “Freedom to Serve”

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Thesis: The way to be right with God is through faith in Christ. Followers of Christ will not abuse their Christian liberty as license to sin. Jesus’ followers know God’s love, love God and love and serve others. Today, we’ll discover the value of serving God by serving others.

Subject: Christian liberty and service

Object: Serve God by serving others

1. The Motive to Serve: The Love [13-15]

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!

Freedom from sin not freedom to sin. Paul is addressing *brethren* [13] or followers of Christ.

Jesus' followers are *called to liberty* [13]. As a follower of Jesus, you've been set free from the penalty and power of sin, and are no longer dominated by a world system opposed to God.

We are *not to use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh* [13]. *The flesh* refers to sinful human nature with its weakness and passions opposed to the spirit. The gospel message that we are saved by grace through faith is not a license to sin, but freedom to love as Jesus loves.

Freedom to serve others through Christ's love. *Through love serve one another* [13], is literally "through *the* love." It is the love of Jesus that motivates our service. Jesus is our example [Mk. 10:45, Jn.13:14-15, Jn. 13:34-35, Ph. 2:5-7].

Freedom to fulfill the law. *For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* [14] The Mosaic Law reveals God's standard of moral perfection, and since no one can fully perform all the commandments it reveals our need for a savior. Nevertheless, Christ's selfless sacrificial love shown to others fulfills the moral requirement between people. The *one word* [14] is love.

When Jesus was asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" He replied quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5, You will love the Lord your God with all you heart, mind, soul, and strength. Then he added the second commandment which is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Lev.19:18, Mt. 22:36-40], and Jesus noted that on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Thus,

the essence of all of the Old Testament can be distilled to love God supremely and love your neighbor as you love yourself. These two commandments are linked together, and cannot be separated.

You cannot love others like Jesus loves without first responding to God's unconditional, unmerited, perfect love for you. And you cannot say that you truly love God without loving others. Your love for others proves your love for God and thus fulfills the law. As you appreciate and appropriate God's love for you, His love flows upon you and out of you upon others. You move from selfish to selfless.

Finally, Paul warns, *but if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!* [15]. If we don't love and serve one another we will damage the community.

2. The Power to Serve: The Spirit [16-18]

¹⁶ I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

To *walk in the Spirit?* [16] means to live a life under the control of the Holy Spirit [Rom. 8:5-6].

The Spirit enables us to do God's will (not the law). If you are controlled and empowered by God's Spirit, *you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh* [16]. We will consider the works of the flesh in a

moment [19-21], but they are set in contrast to Christ-like character described as fruit of the Spirit (which we'll consider next week [5:22-25]).

The Spirit empowers victory over the flesh (not the law).

For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish [7]. As soon as you choose to live to please God, you discover how difficult it truly is. Apart from Christ, man's efforts at better moral living are like filthy rags to God. Once you receive Christ, you experience a spiritual birth, and the Spirit of God battles against your flesh and its lusts that are contrary to God's will. The means to victory is not self-discipline to conform to the Mosaic Law, but spiritual transformation to conform to Jesus [18, Rom. 7:15-8:17].

The need for the Holy Spirit's work in a believer's life cannot be overstated! At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, at His baptism, the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus to authenticate that He was the Messiah; and demonstrate our need for the Holy Spirit [Matt. 3:16]. Similarly, at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, He instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they had received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit [Ac. 1:4-8]. In essence, we cannot rightly live for God by man's efforts at morality, but need God's Spirit to transform and conform us to Christ-likeness.

Group prayer: for God's Spirit and love to be manifest in transformed lives

3. The obstacle to serving: the flesh [19-21]

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

In these three verses, Paul describes *the works of the flesh* [19] and places them in three groups [cf. Rom.1:29-32, Mk.7:20-23, 1Tim.1:9-10, 2Tim.3:2-5]. They are *evident* [19] or seen by God and others. There are eighteen terms, but alas it is only a partial list.

Sexual sin [19]: *adultery* which is unfaithfulness in marriage, *fornication* is the Greek term “porneia” which is the root of our English pornography, and refers generally to all sexual immorality.

Uncleanness is the opposite of purity, and relates to lustful pleasures.

Lewdness implies no shame re sexual immorality which was characteristic of the Greco-Roman world (and perhaps ours too).

Religious sin: [20]: *idolatry* relates to the worship of false gods. Whatever you look to as your ultimate source of contentment and satisfaction, other than God, is an idol. It can be wealth,

possessions, recreation, career, achievements, people (spouse, friends, and family). We are to worship God, love people, and use things, but we may use people, love self, and worship things. Jesus said, whatever you worship that you will serve [Mt. 4:10].

Sorcery is the Greek pharmakia and concerns drugs, witchcraft, and the occult.

Sin in relations with others [20-21]:

In verse 20, *Hatred* relates to malice, *contentions* speak of quarrels, and *jealousy* is wanting what another has. *Wrath involves angry outbursts*, and *selfish ambitions* is the sin of self-centeredness. *Dissensions* relates to separation over disagreements.

In verse 21, *envy* is being upset about another's blessings, *murder* is an unjustified taking of life, *drunkenness* involves intoxication. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is set in contrast to intoxication [Eph. 5:18]. *Revelries* relates to out of control partying.

Paul repeats a warning that he had apparently shared when he was with them, *I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*. Those who have a lifestyle characterized by being controlled by their flesh without a desire to confess, and repent are not saved.

We are saved by grace through faith, and true saving faith results in love for God and love for others, a desire to serve God by serving others, and a transformed relationship with our flesh by God's Spirit. The works of the flesh hinder our relationship with God and ability to love Him and others. The answer is yielding to God's Spirit and growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus!

Study Guide Qs

Q1. In what ways can serving one another build-up a community of faith?

Q2. In what ways can failing to love and serve one another damage a community of faith?

Q3. How have you found loving and serving by the Spirit different than the flesh?

Q4. In what ways do the works of the flesh hinder love and service to others?

Digging Deeper

1. Read Romans 7-8. What did you discover about the problem of the flesh, the inadequacy of self-discipline, and the work of the Holy Spirit? How would you like to apply those lessons to your life?

2. Read the following passages describing the works of the flesh: Rom.1:29-32, Mk.7:20-23, 1Tim. 1:9-10, 2Tim.3:2-5. What did you discover, and how would you like to apply those insights to your life?