

Text: Galatians 5:13-26 – The Freedom of Obedience

Exegetical Big Idea: Faith in Christ is freedom from the law as a means of justification, but it is *not* license to indulge in sinful behavior, rather the Christian is empowered to obedience of the law and love for others.

Homiletical Big Idea: **Freedom in Christ is freedom to live like Christ.**

Fallen Condition Focus: Once a person grasps the concept that they are free from having to obey the law for justification, there is the temptation of the flesh to indulge in sin because, but this is not true freedom in Christ.

Background:

Galatians is a letter that centers around the theme of freedom in Christ. The gospel of Jesus is at its core a gospel of freedom. Thus far in the letter Paul has been arguing against some false teachers that have been teaching that to be right with God a person must keep God's law. Paul points out all kinds of holes in this argument, and shows that relying on obedience to God's law for any part of your salvation means that you must obey the whole thing, which of course no one can do. This is in fact slavery.

Freedom in Christ therefore is freedom from needing to obey God's law in order to be saved, since salvation is by faith alone in the grace of Christ alone.

But that's not the only aspect of freedom that Paul has in mind, and today we are going to see another side of freedom in Christ.

Intro:

Two of my kids just finished up their piano lessons for the summer. In fact just this last week was their recital. The recital is a special event where family and friends all get together and all the students that the teacher is teaching play a piece that they have been working on. The recital marks the end of the piano lesson year. Now to be able to play a piece of music take practice. And during the year when the student is taking lessons, that's exactly what the teacher is going to tell the student to do. The teacher might even have a practice chart for the student to take home and they are told to practice maybe five times during the week and mark it off on their chart. Some students are pretty good at this, but some students are not. When I was young and taking piano lessons I was *not* a good practicer. I was just not very good at listening to and obeying the instructions of my piano teacher. It felt like a law that I had to obey.

So when summer time came, guess what happened? I stopped practicing! I was free from the law of my piano teacher. Even if she came to my house and demanded that I practice I could say to her "no thank you, it's the summer time and I don't have to".

But even though I don't *have* to obey my teacher and practice, what happens if I stop playing the piano over the summer? I will start to forget how to play, and when I go back in the fall I might not even be as good as I was before the summer. I might even have to relearn some things. So even though I don't *have* to practice the piano, it is still good for me to do it. And in fact it has been a long time since my piano teacher has told me to practice the piano, but I'm so glad I kept doing it anyways.

This is kind of like what Paul is writing today to the Galatians. He has spent 4 chapters telling them that they are free from having to obey God's law in order to be right with God. Righteousness, in other words, is not dependent on obedience. Righteousness is obtained solely by faith in Christ. Paul calls this freedom in Christ.

But Paul has a new concern, and that concern is that the Galatians would then be tempted to throw out God's law entirely and think "we don't need it anymore". But they do need God's law.

If they think that since now they don't have to obey God's laws because they are free, then they will not live lives that reflect Christ at all! In fact they will live lives of selfish sin.

Freedom in Christ means freedom from having to obey God's law to be right with him, but it's more than that. Freedom in Christ also means freedom from selfish sin. In fact,

Freedom in Christ is freedom to live like Christ.

Vv. 13a – freedom in Christ is not a license to sin.

Paul begins these verses with the word "for". Which means he is connecting this next thought with the one he just had. This of course was covered in the previous sermon, but just as a reminder, Paul has been battling false teachers this whole letter. The false teachers were trying to convince the Galatians that obedience to the Law of Moses (with some faith mixed in for good measure) was the way to be righteous before God. Paul was very clear to point out that trying to earn salvation through obedience necessarily meant that a person must perfectly obey the entire law without any mistake. This of course is impossible for even the most careful people. The answer to this is that salvation, and righteousness is found in one place and one place only, and that is in Christ Jesus. Salvation is obtained in Christ only by faith in his grace.

Paul reminds the Galatians that they were called to this glorious freedom. And freedom it truly is! Obtaining righteousness by obedience is slavery because as much as a person may work towards it they will never succeed. Freedom in Christ means that I don't have to obey the law to be saved, and in fact I *can't* be saved by obeying the law of God.

This is the reality not just for the Galatian Christians, but for every Christian.

But Paul in his heart is a pastor, and his pastoral heart causes him to anticipate a very important question. And this is the question: If Jesus has forgiven the entirety of my sin (past, present, and future), then why not sin some more since it's already forgiven?

That's what Paul is getting at in the second half of verse 13 when he says "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh". As much as it is true that the Christian is freed from the power of sin, in that it is all forgiven in Christ Jesus, there is still the part of me that rebels against God. This is what Paul calls "the flesh". We get a better picture of what that means when we read passages like Ephesians 2. Paul writes in Ephesians 2 that every human by nature apart from Christ lives to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. He calls it being dead in or sins. But when a person comes to faith in Christ, they are raised to new life in Christ Jesus. The power of that sin to condemn then is gone, and they are free to do the good works that God has prepared for them in advance to do, but they still wrestle with that old nature. Paul himself wrestled with that old nature even as a mature Christian when he writes to the

Roman church that he struggles to do the things he wants to do to obey God, and struggles to avoid doing things that he knows dishonor God.

The flesh part of the Christian wants to take the freedom that is in Christ and use it for sinful indulgence.

[My wife and I love giving our kids treats. We like to see our kids enjoying things in life. We will do things like buy a tub of ice cream from time to time. So we will sit down and the parents will dish out bowls of ice cream to our kids. Do you know what usually happens when the bowl is empty? They will usually ask for more! But we know of course that too much sugar is not good for kids so at some point we will say something like “that’s enough sugar for today, we can have some more tomorrow”. My kids are under the law of mom and dad. But when the kids go to bed, dad is *not* under the law! Here’s the question. Does freedom from the law mean that I should then go and buy as many tubs of ice cream that I want (and can) and eat them all? Is that freedom? Not at all! I would simply be in another time of bondage, bondage to my bowels. Freedom in this case, is that though I am not required to obey the law and restrict ice cream for myself, I *do* in fact restrict myself. I restrict myself because I can, and because I want to.]

Before coming to faith in Christ I was a slave to the law, and a slave to my sin. But after coming to Christ, it does not mean that I then can do whatever I want and indulge in my sin because after all, my sin is completely paid for. That’s not freedom! That’s more bondage.

The opposite of bondage is *not* doing whatever I want.

Freedom in Christ is the *ability* to obey the law because the Holy Spirit lives in me and works in me to produce a character that is like Christ’s. And on top of this ability, he (the Holy Spirit) also gives me the *desire* to obey him!

Slavery to sin and the law leaves me with no desire for obedience, and no ability to obey. Freedom in Christ grants me a new desire to obey God’s law, and the ability to do so to his glory.

It’s to this freedom Paul says “you were called”.

Paul has been primarily concerned so far with legalism. And I hope that if you have struggled with that you have seen the freedom in Christ from legalism. But Paul warns us here not to react in such a way that we use our freedom to think that we can do whatever we want. You were not called to that. You were called to obedience. No genuine believe has ever chosen sin over obedience and said to themselves “I’m sure glad I did that”.

Consider this: Is there anyone more free than Christ, the King and Lord over all of creation? No. Is there anyone more obedient to the will of God than Christ the person Son of God? No. Then should we not strive for the same obedience in freedom as Christ did? Absolutely. This is what you were called to when God chose you before the foundation of the earth, and opened your eyes to see your need for Christ, and gave you the faith to believe and receive eternal life.

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If freedom in Christ does not mean that I can do whatever I want whenever I want without having to think about anyone else but myself, then what exactly does this freedom look like? It's a freedom from selfishness, and freedom to love others the way God intends us to.

Paul chooses his words very carefully when he says in the second half of verse 13 "...but through love serve one another." That word for "serve" is the same word that is used to mean slavery. Paul is doing something very intentional here. He is saying that Christians have been freed from one form of slavery, the slavery of sin and the law that condemns. However, Christians are bound by something different. We are bound to God and each other. It's what we call a paradox!

But let's be clear, even though Paul is using the term "slavery" to talk about how we relate to God and each other, it's not a bondage that hurts us! It's a bondage that truly sets us free! Paul says that we are to be servants (or slaves) to each other "through love". It's clear from the context that this means through the power of the gospel, and in Christ, we can and should serve each other.

Without the love of Christ in me, I have no capacity to give of myself to others. It's only when someone is in Christ by faith that they are empowered, and delight in, the law in verse 14. Look at this distinction: Before faith in Christ, verse 14 condemns me because I cannot keep that command! But in Christ, this law does not condemn me, because I'm made right with God by grace through faith. Instead, this law is my delight.

And it's my delight for a very important reason. God's law is my delight because God's law shows me a picture of my God! It shows me a picture of my deepest delight. When God's law commands that I help my neighbor, it reminds me that God helped me in my time of need. When God's law commands that I be truthful to my neighbor it reminds me that God was truthful with me in showing me my sin and need for Christ, and that he continues to speak the truth to me today in his Word. When God's law says reconcile with my fellow Christian it reminds me that God reconciled me to himself through Christ's death on the cross.

So in verse 14 when God's law is summed up in becoming as a slave for your good, it reminds me that Christ became as a slave for my good. Do you see what happens to the heart of a person who is free in Christ? The law is not something that they "have" to do, but something that they "get" to do.

Because what's the alternative? The alternative is that my deepest delight, and object of my serving, is myself. And that's what Paul is getting at in verse 15. Paul is using the language of consuming, or eating, in these verses. If instead of serving each other we serve only ourselves, it is self-destructing behavior. Paul says if we bite, and devour one another (a picture of selfishness) then it will not lead to joy and satisfaction, but only death and pain. We will consume each other.

[My mind goes to a difficult story in 1 Kings 3. It's the story after Solomon receive wisdom from God in a dream, and the story is meant to show us the wisdom of Solomon in difficult circumstances. In this case, there are two mothers who live in the same house who each have a baby at about the same time. During the night, one of the baby's sadly passes away. The mother of that baby, in her grief, but also her selfishness, switches the babies during the night when everyone is asleep! When morning comes the true mother of the baby that is alive notices that the one in her bed is not her baby! But the other mother lies about it. The case comes before king Solomon. Solomon's wisdom is shown here in his ruling for the case, but he makes his ruling understanding the difference between sacrificial love, and

selfishness. He orders the live baby to be cut in half and one piece given to each mother. The true mother of the baby pleads with Solomon not to go through with it and would rather give up her baby to save his life. The other mother is so far down the road of biting and devouring out of selfishness that she is willing to sacrifice the life of the baby just so the other mother won't have him. Of course Solomon was never going to actually cut the baby, but wanted to see which mother would act out of sacrificial love, and which mother was willing to be selfish to the end.]

It's a hard story to read, but it reveals just what lengths people are willing to go to get what they think is best for them. As much as this is a difficult story, these are simply normal people. We too, are normal people. Which means we too, have this capacity. And this can split the church and kill out witness to the world.

When we speak with biting words and tones to each other in the church, getting angry and frustrated at each other, it breaks us apart. It's the same thing with gossiping and insulting people (often behind their backs). When we put people down and criticize who they are or the work they are doing in the church, we divide the church. And on top of that, what do you think the normal human reaction is when someone does something evil to me? I want to return evil for evil!

We become divided, and when the world looks at the church it sees a people who are not worth emulating. We don't hold out a message of hope to the world, we hold out a message that I'm more important than you. And we become no different than the world.

But the gospel breaks that cycle!

[Think of it like this, going back to Paul's words on eating: Let's say all of us for some reason have not eaten in two weeks. That's a long time to go without food! What would we all be feeling right about now? We'd be hungry! We'd all be thinking probably about one thing and one thing only, namely, "how can I fill my stomach?" Now let's say I ordered a pizza, but only 1 pizza. I bring the pizza in and put it on the table right in the middle of the room and I say anyone who wants it can have it. Since there is not enough to go around, what might happen? Since all of us are starving, and we all want to fill our stomachs, we will all want the pizza for ourselves, and this may result in some fights (though I think more highly than that for our church). This is us before coming to Christ. What changes after believing in Christ? The answer is satisfaction. Change up the scenario, and instead of all of us fasting for 2 weeks we all eat the largest and more delicious meal before coming to church, so that you are so stuffed and satisfied you can't eat another bite. Now what happens when the pizza is brought in? You don't want it because you don't *need* it.]

What causes me to stop biting and devouring others to get what I want? Satisfaction in Christ. If I truly grasp that all my needs and desires are met in Christ, then I have no need to devour others! This is true freedom! If all I have is Christ, then it is infinitely more than I can possibly imagine. True freedom then is not freedom to go out and get even more out of selfishness, but to sacrifice for the good of others! Because here's the reality, when I give of myself for the good of others, am I then lacking? In no way!

Christ is our perfect example of this. Is there anyone more free than Christ? No. He's God eternal. Is there anything that Christ lacks? No. He's God the infinite. And yet what did Christ do? He used his freedom to give himself for your good. And when Christ gave of himself for you, did he then come out the other side lacking something? In no way!

We then ought to do the same, and show each other and the world what it means to be truly satisfied in Christ.

May our church be a “you first” church. I hope that you can say “because Christ became a servant to me, I can be a servant to you”. Freedom in Christ come with a responsibility to others. It’s a responsibility to love, because God first loved us.

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Vv. 16-18 – To live like Christ, we must submit to God’s Spirit.

If we are satisfied in Christ, and want to stay satisfied in Christ, there’s only one thing to do. In verse 16 Paul tells the Galatians to “walk by the Spirit”. The thought starts with “But I say”, meaning the opposite of biting and devouring each other to the result of self-destruction, is walking by the Spirit.

What’s this picture of “walking by the Spirit” that Paul is trying to show? Notice how Paul doesn’t say we are to “sit with” the Spirit, or “get to know” the Spirit, or even simply “listen to” the Spirit. Instead he says “walk by” the Spirit. And in fact it encompasses listening to the Spirit’s voice, and knowing the Spirit, and learning from the Spirit. But it’s more than that. The idea of walking is the idea of movement. The Spirit of God in your heart is moving and leading you, the question is, are you willingly following him? That’s the idea Paul is getting at. The Holy Spirit indwells every single Christian, and his Work in your heart is to every day, without vacation, turn you more and more into the likeness of Jesus. That’s what the second half of verse 16 is talking about. We talked about gratifying the desires of the flesh. That’s anti-Christian behavior. The work of the Holy Spirit in you is to more and more every day turn you more and more into the likely of Christ. Are you going where he’s leading?

The reality is that you will either be led by the Spirit of God, into joyful obedience and righteousness, or you will be led by the flesh into sin and self-destruction. Look at verse 17. “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desire of the Spirit are against the flesh”. They are opposed to each other.

This means that it’s impossible for a genuine Christian to be ok with their sin, and be faithful to God at the same time. The person who is following the leading of their sinful desires and is ok with that, and has no intention to surrender that to God, is not being led by the Spirit of God. I’m not saying Christians won’t mess up, we’ll get to that in a second, but there’s a difference between someone who grieves their sin and repents, and someone who embraces their sin and delights in it.

[I think of it kind of like a teeter-totter at a park. You know those rides that are a long solid beam balancing at the middle. Two kids sit on it, one on either end. Because the beam is solid, it pivots in the center. As one kid goes up what happens to the kid on the other side? He or she goes down. But then it reverses and the kid who is down starts to go up. What happens to the other kid? He or she starts to go down. Back and forth it goes. As long as the thing is moving, it’s impossible for both kids to be up in the air, or both to be down on the ground.]

As a Christian is being led by the Spirit, and is acting according to the desires of the Spirit, what is happened to the desires of the flesh? They are going down? But as a person is following the desires of the flesh, what is happening to the desires of the Spirit, they are going down.

Paul just warned about devouring one another out of selfishness. The old saying goes “how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time”. Constantly ignoring the Spirit and giving into sin and not repenting is

only going to make it easier next time to do the same. But the opposite is also true! Simple daily striving to be obedient to the leading of the Spirit of God is going to make more obedience easier next time! Remember that the picture Paul gives is that of *walking* by the Spirit. It's about movement. Keep going. The reality is that you will not be perfect on this side of eternity, and you will in fact fall on your face. Paul recognizes this in the end part of verse 17. He recognizes that the desire of the flesh "keep you from doing the things you want to do". Remember he's speaking to brothers and sisters in Christ here. What do those who are in Christ *want* to do? They want to honor and obey him! But the struggle is real. Almost like a teeter-totter.

At times you will follow the flesh instead of the Spirit. Which I think is why Paul gives us an important reminder in V.18. I think this verse serves as both a warning, and an encouragement.

It's a warning because if there is no evidence of being led by the Spirit of God, which is to say no growth in obedience or righteousness, then there is serious concern that you are still under the law! You will stand one day before God and be judge on account of your disobedience to his law. You will fall short, because everyone judged on that basis does, and you will be forever in hell. But you can today repent of that today.

But this verse is also an encouraging reminder. Have you put your faith in Christ? Have you come to him empty handed to receive his grace as a gift knowing you can't earn your salvation? Then the Holy Spirit lives in you, and though you fall, He leads you and works in you to turn you more and more into the likeness of Christ. And for that person, though they struggle, they can declare what Paul say here that they are "not under the law". The law cannot condemn you, because Christ has already paid the price.

Charles Spurgeon was a great preacher long ago and he has a thought on this verse. He says, the Christian is not under the law, but under grace. Where then is the law? It is now under the Christian, like a road that guides us.

That's true freedom in Christ. Freedom in Christ is the freedom from condemnation from the law, but the delight in, and ability to obey it for God's glory and our good.

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