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Galatians

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. Galatians 5:13

The word "For" is given as a justification for the immensely strong words of the previous verse. He had said that those who were into cutting the flesh should go ahead and emasculate themselves. "For" now explains that harshness. Unlike those Judaizers who stood against the gospel, Paul is speaking to the Galatians as "brethren." They were saved by Christ and stood in a completely different relation to Him than those false teachers. As they are his brothers, they "have been called to liberty."

The circumcising of the flesh is identification with the people of Israel and, more especially, a willingness to adhere to the rites and customs of that people who were bound to the law. In the coming of Christ, that law was now fulfilled, but those of Israel who had rejected Him spent their time not honoring God through Christ, but by boasting in the flesh. Paul has noted that this is bondage. The Galatians however were free from this bondage and set at liberty by Christ. They were no longer under the power of sin, but are freedmen in Christ.

Because of this position they hold, he next admonishes them by saying, "...only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh." What is very easy to do when one has no law to guide them is to fall into the lowest levels of depravity. This was seen with the Corinthians. For example the man referenced in 1 Corinthians 5 had fallen into sexual immorality which was "such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles." Paul warns them of this. Freedom in Christ is not

license to sin. Rather, he gives them a contrast to hold to by saying, "...but through love serve one another."

The word "serve" carries stress in this clause. As freedmen, they were not to serve the flesh, but rather they were to take on another form of servitude; they were to "serve one another." Paul will explain the basis for this in his words to come, but for now we must consider the contrast which has been presented. Christians are freed from the constraints of the law, but they are, in essence, obligated to the service of one another. They are freed from sin's penalty, but they are obligated to freedom's standards and expectations. This may sound contradictory, but he clearly shows that with Christ's freedom come such expectations and responsibilities.

Life application: In Christ, we are given great freedoms, but with this also come great responsibilities. If we are to be faithful to this calling, we should continually talk to the Lord, asking for His guidance and assistance in our walk. On our own, we are prone to wander, but by keeping close to Him and to His word, we will be in a much better position to handle the trials and temptations which are sure to come our way.

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:14

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment is, He responded

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"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" Luke 10:27

Paul's words now echo that sentiment, but deal with the issue at hand, which is relations with one's neighbor. Therefore, he cites that part as pertinent to the situation which the Galatians were facing. If one is to serve in love, then

everything else will fall into its proper place. We do not serve the law; it is fulfilled in Christ. We serve, rather, one another in love. This is what is given to bind us together and to keep us from the very thing which had been forced upon them by the Judaizers. These false teachers wanted to control, not serve. They wanted deeds of the flesh, not love of the heart. These things are contrary to what is expected of saved believers in Christ.

Paul expands on the thought of this verse in Romans 13:8-10. There, he goes from the general proposition of this verse to the accomplishment of the action -

"Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet,' and if *there is* any other commandment, are *all* summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love *is* the fulfillment of the law."

Life application: If one is not acting in love, then it is not of God. Anyone can make an offering to a church, but unless there is love behind the offering, it is a vain and self-serving gift. The same holds true with any action between us and God and us and our fellow man. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.

But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! Galatians 5:15

Paul now uses metaphors to show the inevitable result of divisions and strife. He says that "if you bite and devour one another" it can only lead to serious harm. The idea here is in contrast to the loving and serving of the previous two verses.

People who stab one another over minor theological issues might be compared to those who "bite" at one another. Those who utterly destroy others over their

theological variances could be compared to those who "devour" one another. The word translated as "bite" gives the idea of serious harm; that of "devour" gives the idea of complete ruination, where even no remains are left behind.

To avoid these harmful battles among the brethren, Paul admonishes them to "beware lest you be consumed by one another!" Just as wild animals bite and devour, they continue to do so until there is nothing left. At this point, they move on to find their next prey. If the Galatians cannot serve in love, they will inevitably come to a point where they are completely devoured. The congregation will be destroyed, and the joy of Christ will no longer be proclaimed.

All of this starts with the first bite. A little theological quibbling over disputable matters generally explodes into complete ruin because pride steps in and refuses to relent. And how common this has become, especially on social media where people don't even have to face one another. It has become the standard of many to simply shoot out arrogant and harmful words in order to show how theologically adept they are. And this usually occurs by those who actually know very little and who argue over matters they haven't fully thought through.

Life application: What value is there in tearing apart another person who has devoted their time to carefully analyzing and then preparing a commentary on a passage of Scripture? If you disagree on a point of doctrine, is it truly necessary to attack them over it? Instead, a simple comment about your own position should suffice to show what you believe.

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.
Galatians 5:16

As a rule of guidance and practical application based on verses 13-15, Paul now says, "I say then..." In order for the Christian to close the door to living in the flesh, and rather to open the door of serving in love, he provides the following advice which is that we are to "Walk in the Spirit." Some translations more rightly say, "...by the Spirit." Either way, the New Living Translation gives an adequate and

understandable paraphrase of Paul's intent with the words, "...let the Holy Spirit guide your lives."

We are to live by the Spirit as a rule for guidance and action within our lives. The term "walk" is a customary metaphor Paul uses. It is not to be taken literally, but as a means of expressing a life of constant and unwavering conduct. Our "walk," or our constant and habitual practice, is to live by the Spirit. In so doing, we "shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." This is not referring to the simple desires of the physical nature, of which all of us continue to live with while in our earthly bodies. Rather it refers to the "desire which is peculiar to human nature without the divine Spirit" (Vincent's Word Studies).

When we live by the Spirit, this lust of the flesh can have no power over us. This is extremely well explained by Charles Ellicott -

"The flesh is known by a long catalogue of sins, the Spirit by a like catalogue of Christian graces, the mere mention of which is enough to show that the Law has no power over them. Those who belong to Christ have got rid of the flesh, with all its impulses, by their union with a crucified Saviour."

Ellicott's words concerning, "a long catalogue of sins" is rich in significance. If the law had not been given, those things which were mandated could not be considered sinful when done. For example, if there was no law that said, "You cannot eat pork," then there could be no penalty for eating pork. But as soon as the law was given, eating pork became a cataloged sin. The same is true with coveting, wearing clothes of two different materials, working on a Saturday (a Sabbath), or any other of the 600+ laws which the Law of Moses prescribed. Each mandate only increased the knowledge of sin and increased violations when they occurred.

However, by receiving Christ who fulfilled the law for us, we are freed from the penalty of those laws because the law is annulled in Christ. Those sins can have no power over us when we walk by the Spirit. As always, this is the great contrast

that Paul highlights. It is also the reason why he adamantly asks us not to fall back on deeds of the law for our righteousness. When we do so, we only reapply that lengthy catalogue of sins to our lives and we end in a life of the flesh, not a life guided by the Spirit.

Life application: If you have been reading these verses of Paul and thinking, "Yes, but I know that I need to just not eat pork. The rest of the law is ok to ignore, but no pork chops..." Then you have still failed to grasp what Christ has done for you. It is all or nothing. Stop putting deeds of the law back into your life! Be freed from it once and for all. Live by the Spirit; not by the flesh.

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.

Galatians 5:17

Paul now explains the necessary reason why we should "walk in the Spirit" as he stated in the previous verse. It is because there is, as it were, a war between the two. They can never be at harmony with one another because they "are contrary to one another." This does not mean, nor does Paul imply, that the physical world, including our flesh, is evil. Rather, it becomes the seat of evil through our contrary carnal walk.

God created matter and declared it good. However, our natural inclinations since the fall have worked against what is good and have used the physical creation for evil purposes. In this Paul explains that "the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh." He further explains this in Romans 8:6-8 -

"For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. ⁷ Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ⁸ So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

As noted there, it is the mind of the flesh, the carnal mind, which Paul is referring to. Only in Christ can there be a true break from this. In Romans 7, Paul sets up the dilemma with these words -

"For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁶ If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that *it is* good. ¹⁷ But now, *it is* no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice." Romans 7:15-19

As the two are contrary to one another, we find ourselves in a losing war if we walk in the flesh. Only through reliance on Christ can we find the true victory. By faith in Him, we receive the Spirit. By continued faith in Him, we walk in the Spirit.

The point of Paul's words is to show that by falling back on the deeds of the law, we are not walking in the Spirit. The Spirit only guides those who trust in Christ, not in deeds. As this is so, those who walk in the flesh, meaning deeds of the law, cannot be pleasing to God. They are walking contrary to His purposes.

Life application: If you are following the Hebrew Roots movement or some congregation which says you should be following precepts of the law, you are not pleasing to God. You have been duped by the devil. Trust in God, rest in Christ, and walk in the Spirit.