

GALATIANS 5:1-25

Freedom and Fruit

Memory Verse

"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

Galatians 5:13

Real-life Problems

Rebellion

Sometimes, our struggle isn't with legalism but with the exact opposite: rebellion. We are tempted to take God's grace for granted and live according to our own desires, completely denying that we are part of His family at all. When we live "according to the flesh," we do whatever suits our own selfish desires, ignoring or forgetting that we are God's children.

The Good News

We can rest in God's grace and know that we are not justified by our works. We are freed from the law, and now can live by the Spirit. Because God first loved us, we can love Him, and we will desire to serve and obey Him by loving and serving those around us. Our obedience isn't our own, nor is it a means of salvation, but rather it is God's transforming work within us.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Can you think of a TV or movie character who was a "rebel"? What are the traits of a rebel?

Idea #2: What does it mean to be free? Is it the complete absence of rules?

Idea #3: What is your favorite fruit, and why?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Galatians?

The apostle Paul wrote Galatians. In the early church, an apostle was someone sent with divine authority, and Paul received his message directly from Jesus (Gal 1:12, 15-23).

2) Who was the original audience?

Paul wrote "to the churches in Galatia" (v. 2), indicating a number of churches scattered throughout the region of Galatia in central Turkey. Many members of Paul's original audience were Gentile converts to Christianity.

3) Why was the letter to the Galatians written?

Paul wrote to correct and encourage the churches, which had been divided by theological and racial issues because of false teachers.

What's going on?

REMIND

Last week, we learned that not only are we justified by God's grace, but through faith, we are adopted as sons and heirs of God. The Holy Spirit dwells in us, and we are free to live as children of God's promise.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

Building off of last week, Paul continues with the subject of freedom, reminding the Galatians that they have been set free from the law, and as a result, things like circumcision are of no value for salvation. At the same time, our freedom from the law as a means of justification is not an excuse for us to live sinfully. Instead of living by our flesh, we are called to live by the Spirit.

- 1) In Christ, we are free from the law and its requirements, like circumcision (vv. 1-12)
- 2) This freedom is not an excuse to live sinfully, according to the flesh (vv. 13-21)
- 3) We are freed to live by the Spirit, bearing fruit in obedience to God (vv. 13-18, 22-26)

Read

Read **Galatians 5:1-25** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) According to Galatians 5:1, why have we been set free? What are we freed from? What are we called to do in our freedom?

We have been set free for the sake of freedom! God does not want us enslaved to the law, but free to obey willingly and out of love. Though we have been set free, Paul warns that we must "stand firm" and be careful not to resubmit ourselves to the law.

2) What happens when we seek to be justified by the law (v. 4)?

When we try to earn God's favor and justify ourselves by our own efforts, we are "severed" or "estranged" from Christ. We are separated from Him because we are rejecting Jesus' sacrificial work on the cross and replacing His grace with our own works, which are insufficient. This doesn't mean that we are no longer saved or have "fallen from grace" as we use the phrase today. Our good or bad deeds have no impact on our salvation one way or another. However, Paul is saying that when we attempt to justify ourselves by the law instead of trusting in His grace, we are "falling into" legalism and away from grace. We are either trusting in ourselves, or in God; we cannot do both.

3) What doesn't matter, according to verse 6? What does count?

Whether someone is circumcised or not is irrelevant. Circumcision cannot save someone. What does matter is faith in Christ, which manifests itself through love (of God and people).

4) How is the law summarized in verse 14?

Paul sums the law up as "love your neighbor as yourself." This mirrors Jesus' teachings on the matter as well, when He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Mt 22:37-40).

5) What are some examples of works of the flesh (vv. 19-21)? What happens to people who live by the flesh?

Paul lists several characteristics of people who live by the flesh (though the list is not exhaustive): sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like." Though we all might stumble into one or more of these sins, Paul is concerned with people who repeatedly and willingly live by the flesh, and he says that these people will not inherit the kingdom of God.

6) What is the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 22-23)?

On the other hand, the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

7) What two things does Paul instruct us to do as followers of Jesus in verses 24-25?

In verse 24, he tells us that we must crucify the desires of our flesh. In verse 25, he instructs us to live by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit.

B. SO WHAT?

1) What have we been set free from (v. 1)? Why is living under the law insufficient?

We have been set free from the law. More specifically, we have been set free from living under the law as a means of justification. When we try to use the law (or standards of behavior in general) to justify ourselves before God, Paul reminds us that we must adhere to the entire law—which is impossible. No one can be sinless for even one day, so the law only reminds us of our own insufficiency. When we live self-righteously under the law, we are filled with fear and anxiety about our standing before God, and we tend to judge others who are openly sinful around us.

2) In verses 2-6, what is circumcision representative of? Is circumcision a sin? Is uncircumcision a sin?

What's Paul's point in verses 2-6?

Here, Paul uses circumcision as a stand-in for the entire Jewish law. As an outward expression of one's Jewishness, Paul used it as a symbol of the entire law. In the controversy in Galatia, circumcision was a major point of contention between the Judaizers and Gentile believers. In and of itself, circumcision is neither a good thing nor a bad thing (v. 6); it has no ability to save us before God, so Paul wants the Galatians to stop fretting about it.

Here, it is important to note the difference between circumcision (part of Jewish ceremonial law) and the Ten Commandments (part of Jewish moral law). While we still are urged to follow the moral instruction of the Old Testament, Paul is clear that we are no longer bound one way or another to ceremonial laws like circumcision. Ultimately, strict adherence to the law—moral or ceremonial—cannot save you, so Paul wants the Galatians to reject this self-imposed legalism and embrace the freedom in Christ. All that matters is faith in Christ, which itself will show itself through loving God and loving others.

3) What, according to verse 5, is our hope, and where is it found?

We wait for "the hope of righteousness," which has a twofold meaning. First, this reminds us that we cannot make ourselves righteous by our own actions. We must look to God to work in us and perfect us through His Spirit (sanctifying us) until Christ returns. Second, righteousness refers to being declared as right and justified before God. When we believe in Jesus, we trust that He, not our own efforts, makes us right before God.

As an aside, pastor Tim Keller points out a subtle but helpful difference from the original Greek and our English translations. When Paul uses the word "hope," he uses the word *elpida*, which goes beyond our definition of hope. When we "hope" for something, we usually mean that we want something to happen, but we're not 100 percent certain that it will. The word *elpida*, however, indicates "total assurance" and "certainty" in the outcome. How does this change how we read this verse?

4) Does the freedom from the law free us to live however we please?

No. God does not give us a blank check to go and sin as we please. In verse 13, Paul says, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." So as Christians, we are called to flee both legalism and rebellion. Moral behavior cannot save us, but God does call us to obedience.

5) Can you live by the Spirit and by the flesh? Why or why not? (vv. 16-17) What do you notice about our "desires" and "works of the flesh" (vv. 16-21)? How do they affect us? How do they affect those around us?

In verse 17, Paul makes it clear that the desires of the flesh and of the Spirit are so opposed to each other that we cannot choose to serve both masters. We either submit to the desires of the flesh (theologically, we can

refer to this as rebellion or hedonism), or to the desires of the Spirit. Practically, in our everyday lives, we may feel the push and pull of flesh and Spirit within us as the conflict rages, but we can take heart knowing that we are forgiven and justified by Christ, not by our moral successes and failures.

The desires of the flesh are things that we think will bring us happiness, pleasure, or solutions to problems we may face. They are self-seeking and the opposite of "love your neighbor as yourself." Some are clear actions, while others are thoughts and attitudes—both are sinful. Some translations might translate "desires" as the word "lust," which carries a sexual connotation. However, as pastor Tim Keller notes, Paul's original intention is to point out that desires and lusts of the flesh are often "inordinate desires" or "over-desires" of good things. After all, that's what idolatry is—taking a good thing and treating it like God. As such, we must be aware that the desires of the flesh are not always bad, glaring sins, but often good things that we come to lust after too strongly, replacing God.

6) What is the difference between living by the Spirit and living by the flesh? How does this fruit differ from the works of the flesh?

The war between flesh and Spirit rages within us, and we will fail to walk in step with the Spirit, no matter how much we want to. Paul recognizes this in verse 17, but he also offers hope; though we may stumble, we know that we are trying to live in step with the Spirit. We know that we—with the help of the Spirit within us—desire to love, obey, and serve God. Those who live by the flesh and those who try to live by the law both fail to completely trust God's grace. They undercut God's gift by trying to earn it themselves, or by rebelling against it. When we walk by the Spirit, we may still stumble, but we trust God's grace completely. We surrender to the Spirit and to His way. The fruit of the spirit is an outpouring of a Spirit-filled heart, one that is selfless, loving, and rooted in an unshakable trust in God.

Fruit of the Spirit

Learning the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—is one of the more popular Sunday school lessons growing up. But why does Paul pick fruit as his metaphor?

- On a tree, fruit attracts animals so that the seed can spread. Likewise, spiritual fruit is a way of living a unique life from the world around us, pointing others to Christ.
- Fruit is good to eat; spiritual fruit is good to consume and share.
- Fruit is the outward sign and marker of the specific plant; our spiritual fruit is the outward behavior reflected from a healthy and Spirit-filled heart.
- It takes time for flowers to bloom or fruit to ripen; often it can feel painfully long before we begin to see our spiritual fruit develop, but we can trust the Spirit's work.
- These characteristics are not separate fruits, but one unified fruit that grows together—it's not like we can pick and choose which fruits we want to bear and which ones we don't.

7) What's the difference between Paul's command to crucify the flesh and the Judaizers' command to follow the Jewish law (v. 24)?

In addition to faith in Christ, the Judaizers demanded obedience to Mosaic law as the path to salvation. Without being circumcised, they argued that Gentile believers could not be a part of God's family. Not only was this diminishing to Jesus' saving work on the cross, but it was also impossible—no one could faithfully obey the entirety of the law, and as a result, there would be constant fear and worry about being "good enough" for God.

Paul, on the other hand, argues that we are entirely saved by God's grace. Then, he reminds us that God still calls us to pursue and imitate Him (Eph 5:1), but out of love, not fear. Though it may take time for our spiritual fruit to blossom, we can rest knowing that we belong to Christ (v. 26). Working from this acceptance, and with the Spirit within us, we can begin to see sin and the desires of the flesh like God sees them. Martin Luther reminds us that "sin is sin, and God always hates sin," and we must be willing to put these desires, good and bad, to death. Later, Luther explains how to crucify these desires, saying, "when [we] walk according to the spirit...being armed with the word of God, with faith, and with prayer, [we] do not obey the lusts of the flesh. When [we] resist the flesh after this manner, [we] nail it to the cross." In this world, we will never be perfect, but when we die or when Christ returns, the flesh will be put to death once and for all.

C. NOW WHAT?**1) Are you more tempted toward legalism or rebellion? What do both of these reveal about us and about God?**

Answers may vary. Whether one is more tempted toward legalism or rebellion, both tendencies put the self before God. For the rebellious, it means putting yourself above how God has called you to live, ignoring His grace and trusting in yourself rather than in Him. As a result, God and the people around you take a backseat to your desires. For the legalists, it means minimizing God's grace by trying to add your performance to His good and perfect work on the cross. Both ways are sinful.

2) Where are you living according to the flesh in your life? What desires—maybe even good things that you desire excessively—might you need to crucify? Do you see any evidence of the fruit of the spirit in your life?**3) What would it look like to live in step with the Spirit? Can you think of any mentors who live a spiritually fruitful life?****4) If God doesn't intend for us to live according the law, what role does it play in our lives today? How can we obey without being enslaved to the law?**

When we seek to live in step with the Spirit, we find that God's law plays an important role in our lives, but it is not the means of our salvation. God provided His moral law for our benefit, and He calls us to obey, treating our neighbors as they deserve to be treated and loving God above anyone else. But when we walk by the Spirit, we don't obey out of fear, anxiety, or self-righteousness. We rest knowing that our performance doesn't determine our status before God. Instead, when we walk in the Spirit, we obey out of love, gratitude, and a desire to do the will of God the Father.

Main takeaway

In Christ, we are freed from having to live in fear of failing to win God's acceptance through our moral performance. We are freed from the law; at the same time, however, this freedom is not a blank check to sin and live as we please. It is an invitation to live in step with His Spirit, which fills and transforms us. When we recognize the depth of God's grace and love for us, we will understand that neither legalism nor rebellion is the appropriate response, but rather loving, faithful obedience because He first loved us.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

We can rest in God's grace and know that we are not justified by our works. We are freed from the law, and now can live by the Spirit. Because God first loved us, we can love Him, and we will desire to serve and obey Him by loving and serving those around us. Our obedience isn't our own, nor is it a means of salvation, but rather, it is God's changing work within us.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, thank You for adopting us as sons, setting us free from seeking fearful, anxious, and performance-based self-justification. Instead, You have set us free and filled us with Your Spirit, helping us to crucify our selfish desires and pursue You more. Lead us deeper into Your love, and help us to be faithful bearers of spiritual fruit in this world. Amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Are you tempted to abuse the freedom in Christ and live in rebellion to God? Why or why not?
- 2) Where are you living by the flesh in your life? What desires do you need to crucify? On the other hand, what areas of your life do you see spiritual fruit blossoming?
- 3) What would it look like to live in step with the Spirit? Does obedience come willingly, or out of obligation?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Take some time to share with one another where you see yourself living according to the flesh. How do you struggle with rebellion against God?
- 2) What would it look like to live in step with the Spirit? Can you think of examples of people who live spiritually fruitful lives? As parents, are you setting a faithful example for your children?
- 3) As a family, encourage one another. Where do you see spiritual fruit in one another? How can you support each other in your own spiritual walk?