Galatians 5:1-26

Key Verse: 5:1

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Tomorrow is the 4th of July, and Mark thought it would be better to take a break from this summer's Revelation studies while he is out of town, and focus on a passage about freedom. Freedom not from an oppressive government, but from sin. We settled on this passage from Galatians. The letter of Galatians was addressed from Paul to the churches of Galatia that Paul had visited towards the end of his first missionary trip. Paul had attended to these early churches as they were getting started, and stayed with them long enough to ensure that they had a sturdy foundation. Shortly after leaving though, Judaizers, who believed that the Mosaic law was still necessary for salvation even with Jesus' sacrifice, visited the churches and began to influence them towards following the law as a requirement for salvation. Paul, in response to hearing reports of this, wrote this letter to the churches to reaffirm what he had taught them about Jesus. [opening prayer]

Part 1: Christ's Sacrifice Fulfills the Law

This passage can be divided into two parts. The first half covers Jesus' sacrifice in relation to the law. Paul writes to remind those of Galatia that Christians who believe they are somehow justified, either in part or in whole, by following rules of the law have both distanced themselves Jesus' sacrifice, as well as also signing up to follow the entirety of the law. Paul wants to make these points so strongly that he repeats them several times in the letter of Galatians.

There was a lot at stake to keep the message of the gospel from being corrupted by this line of thought. Let's read 5:2. Paul states that even following the one Jewish ritual rule of circumcision, for the sake of following the law, is enough to cancel out all value to us of Jesus' sacrifice. All it takes is that tiny amount of self-reliance, trying to take salvation into your own hands. Now, their insistence on circumcision may seem silly to us. But, to them, it was very important. Genesis 17:11 reads, “You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.” Even in that context, the ritual may still seem weird. But, the descendants of Abraham later found out that this ritual had a symbolic meaning. Deuteronomy 30:6 says, “The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” This strange ritual was meant to remind them to look to their own selves and cut away their pride and selfishness, so that they may love God and remain faithful to him.

But, these were Christians. Jesus had already encouraged his followers to love God and remain faithful to him, as he himself did these. Jesus had spent years teaching and setting this example for his believers, so that they too would love God as he did. Because of this, they did not need require a visceral ritual to remind them of these things. Paul states this in Romans 2:28-29a, “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.” With that in mind, the ritual of circumcision, when practiced only for the purpose of following the law, becomes at best a mere human tradition and at worst a stumbling block in following Jesus. Let's skip ahead a little and read 5:4. Any person who tries to justify their self by their own works (even just a little bit), has not fully accepted Jesus' sacrifice. They have walked away from the grace freely given, and decided that they will no longer rely on Jesus alone. Salvation is not the end result of some math equation. We don't further ensure our own salvation by both following Jesus and the law. At the entrance to heaven, there isn't going to be a sign that says “You must be this saved in order to enter”. You are either saved, or not.

Then, Paul takes this a step further. This one small act will eventually lead to Christians following the whole law and deemphisizing the Christ. Paul knows this, so he prepares them for it. Now, let's go back and read 5:3. If you -want- to try to be saved by your own works, you must follow all of the law to the letter. As Deuteronomy 27:26 says, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” The many pitfalls on this path to salvation threaten to lead anyone who attempts this path astray: countless number of rules to follow, rules with no obvious reasoning attached, misunderstandings of the law, pride of relying on oneself, exposure to idolatry and other beliefs of your neighbors, etc. There are so many things that can lead a person away from God and his will when trying to follow the law, that it makes no sense to try to do it when we already have Jesus.

With him, we have a great hope. Let's read 5:5. By our faith, God will grant us righteousness. It's not like us just trying to follow the law and -maybe- we will succeed and be righteous in the eyes of God. This righteousness is freely and completely given to those who are willing to accept it. Let's read 5:6. This is why following the commands of the law for the sake of salvation is not a benefit to Christians. We already have salvation as long as we remain faithful. What need do we have for the written law? Jesus' sacrifice has freed us not only from sin, but from trying to follow the perfect standard set for us under the law.

Given this, why would -any- faithful Christians seek to begin following such rules again? Let's read 5:7-10. Paul says they were running a good race; he believes that these Christians were in fact faithful. But, nevertheless, they had started going back to the old ways of the first covenant and replacing faith with human tradition. Only through outside influence could this happen. And as Paul describes yeast, these false beliefs quickly spread out from a few to many. This is not to say that the false teachers were being malicious. They could have been quite genuine in their belief that these Christians were on the path to joining the Jewish people, but that they had to do so through the law alone. But, it is also possible that their hearts were in fact not genuine. Let's read 5:11. Even as these few teachers went out to preach the law of circumcision, Paul was still being aggressively persecuted by hard-line Jewish leaders while he tended to the new churches throughout the Mediterranean. As an example, Acts 14:19 reads, “Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.” Over a human tradition of circumcision, these Jews were willing to break one of the 10 first commandments given by God, and attempted to have Paul murdered, just as Jesus had been unjustly put to death.

And here, we begin to see how Jesus truly frees us from sin. Without the need to justify ourselves, we know in our hearts and minds that God is with us and don't feel insecure about our salvation. We don't have to worry about making a big show about following the law or go to great extremes to expose and destroy any we believe to be heretics, thinking that only this will earn us our salvation. We can simply focus on loving and remaining faithful to God, free from both sin and from our own sinful nature, and on helping others to do the same for their own sake.

Part 2: Walk by the Spirit

In the second half of this passage, Paul discusses how we should act with the grace given to us. Let's read 5:13a. One possible motivation for the Jewish Christians insisting on following the law is because laws ensure that there isn't chaos. With infinite grace freely given, some people will inevitably act to abuse that grace. Most Jews and Christians, then and now, know this. As a community, we don't want that to happen, and the law kind of protects us from that. It makes us feel safe. But, if you seek to place another burden upon Christians, in this case the law, then you are going against what Jesus intended. Paul reiterates here that Jesus meant for them to feel free, as if they could do anything they wanted, as scary as that sounds. Without having chosen to love and serve others, we aren't able to change inwardly. In order for the holy spirit to do his thing, we have to be given this freedom.

Paul then follows up with what we can do with this freedom, and what we should do with it. Let's read 5:13b-c. To clarify this, the word “flesh” used here, and later in the passage, is the Greek word that is generally used by Paul to refer to the inherent selfish nature of ourselves in this life. Here, Paul is setting up two contrasting choices here for us: one that is self-serving out of love for our own selves, and one that is serving others out of love for them. It seems like that second option seems awfully less free than the first one, doesn't it? Humbly serving and loving others, even when it isn't returned, even when we are hurt because of it, even by the person we are serving. That sounds a lot like slavery doesn't it? In fact, whenever Christian persecution is at its worst, this could in fact be almost equal to the conditions of slavery. Paul disagrees though. Let's re-read the key verse, 5:1. Paul says that it's the first option, which -all- of them, both gentile and Jew, have come from, that is true slavery. All of these Christians were also being tempted by the Roman culture that they were exposed to on all sides. Additionally, many of the Christians in these churches were gentile, with some having been brought up in that culture. Many of them probably knew these temptations very well, and were struggling against them, just like us. Paul strongly urges all of us to remain out of this slavery of the mind, the only kind of slavery that truly matters.

Next, Paul reiterates the choices and which we should choose, this time with practical reasons. Let's read 5:14. To the Judaizers and Christians who had begun following the law, Paul writes that the law itself is already fulfilled in choosing to serve and love others. Jesus himself said in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5:17), he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. In following his example for us, we would already be fulfilling the intent of the law, regardless of whether or not the law was there. In fact, Jesus referred to the same verse in Deuteronomy that Paul did here when he was asked what the greatest commandments are. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus 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.” Those who were sincere in wanting to follow the law for God would not be acting against it in following Jesus alone.

Now, let's read 5:15. Paul turns his attention to the other side, those who might now be considering a life of living selfishly. If even a few had completely fallen away into sin within the community and were not thrown out, they would likely take many others in the community with them. At that point, a community of people leaving for themselves? He tells them to expect such a community to break apart from within. The verbs he uses, biting and devouring, sound like something an animal would do, not a human. He says such beasts would only destroy each other. His threat turned out to be true as well. Later in Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians to be specific (1 Corinthians 6:1-6), members of the church were bringing lawsuits against one another. Members of that church actually did start to live selfishly with the freedom they had been given. That kind of selfish nature would have absolutely fractured the Corinthian church if it had been allowed to grow.

As most of you know, some of us rent out the floor upstairs to live in. I've been one of them for like six years now. For a time after I was finished with my bachelors degree and was looking for a job, I didn't have any money. Joseph actually encouraged me to try getting a temporary job and drove me around to fill out a few job applications in places around here. I actually had to put off paying rent for a few months. Imagine if after that first month or two, people here started the eviction process and sued me for the rent. I know I wasn't the only one who struggled with rent at the time, too. With attitudes like that, this community would be of a very different kind, and likely a lot smaller. Maybe we would've only needed this front row of chairs for everyone that remained. This is not the kind of community that we are called to, and it honestly doesn't sound like a very pleasant one to be in. But, if we act in this way, we should expect others to follow. Instead, as Paul says, we should work to love and serve others humbly.

So, if we instead choose door number two, to love and serve others, how can we change? Let's read 5:16-17. Again, Paul sets up the choices as contrasting sides: the Spirit which guides us to love one another, and our own nature which tells us to only serve our own desires. And, the two sides are almost always present. Many of us will not be able to do whatever we want, no matter which side we choose at the time. If you want to do what is right, your human nature will still pull you away towards your own desires. If you want to follow your own desires, the Spirit will remind you of what is right. Matthew 6:24(a-b) adds, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” Neither of these forces pulling away at us is comfortable sharing with the other.

I can attest to this. For me, personally, my current struggle is with reaching out to love and serve others. I am so much less talkative than most people are, that I feel out of place being around others. My natural way of dealing with it is to just keep to myself, to avoid the problem. There's nothing inherently wrong with this. But, it prevents me from really being able to serve and love others. I cannot do these things for others when I keep myself away from them. Over time, I have learned that the only way to do what is right, to love and serve others, is to “walk by the Spirit”, as Paul says. It is only by him that we can be led to do what is right over our own self-centered nature. Let's read 5:18. If we do let ourselves be led by the Spirit, he will lead us out of sin and into righteousness. And, he will be so effective at it, that there will no longer be a reason for the law either. He will write it on our hearts, so that we will be led to love God and love others. He will free us from both our own selfish nature and from the law, if only we allow him to.

Now, Paul gives a list of what he considers acts of the flesh, the kind of acts that tear apart a church from within. Let's look at 5:19-21a. Just to make sure there are no further misunderstandings, Paul tries to give a pretty comprehensive list. If you look at them and try to summarize them, it appears that acts of the flesh are anything that leads us away from God or divides our community. It's important to note that the word “acts” here also means “works” in Greek, or simply the result of. Notice that some of these listed are the outward act that comes from the desire, and others are that desire. Paul believes that these things are quite serious as well. Let's read 5:21b. To us, as Christians, this will always be the strongest negative consequence of them all, to have no inheritance in the kingdom, that we remain rejected by the Lord that gives us life. But, it is the truth. If we have not accepted God and the Spirit, how can we expect them to accept us?

Instead, Paul shows us the kind of person that the Spirit will lead us to become, if we let him. Let's look at 5:22-23. Notice that all of them can be hindered or prevented by the works of the flesh that Paul mentioned earlier. Again, these are two different extremes Paul is talking about, and they both act against each other. At the center of all of these works of the Spirit, the first that Paul mentions, is love. If we have love, then we are pushed to do the rest of these. And again, the law is not against love for our neighbor, but for it.

Paul concludes the passage by urging one final time to do what is right with the freedom we now have. Let's read 5:25-26. We absolutely have forgiveness of sin in Christ. At any time we can choose to act selfishly or selflessly, and our community and those within it will be affected by it. Do we want to waste this opportunity to be free of our own nature? Do we want our community, right here, to be based primarily on self-interest? If not, then let us allow the Spirit to guide us into following Jesus' example. Let's read the key verse one more time. [closing prayer]