

Galatians

Unbound, Unchained, Unbroken

Week 11 | Galatians 5:13–26

Lisa Scheffler, author

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With summer coming, a lot of us are dreaming of a vacation — the chance to take a few days off, not think about our day to day responsibilities, and enjoy short-term freedom from our ordinary life. It sounds amazing, doesn't it? Yet, there is sometimes an odd feeling that comes with a vacation.

On that first morning, with no alarm or young children to startle you awake, your eyes open when they are ready. As you come to consciousness, and your thoughts start taking shape, it hits you — what are you going to do with your day? In our busy and highly scheduled lives, many of us never have to ask that question. But on vacation, when we're free, what are we supposed to do? It's odd, but freedom can be a little disorienting.

Paul's message of freedom in Christ can also be a little disorienting, especially to people who are used to following a strict code of conduct. In Paul's day, this message even made some people suspicious. Without the law to guide and correct, wouldn't people just run wild, doing whatever they wanted? Without the law, what would keep people from sin?

Paul's going to deal directly with this objection in our passage for the week. Paul has the answer to that disorienting thought, what do we do when we're free?

Day 1

As we've seen, the controversy in Galatians revolved around the Mosaic law. Jewish Christians were expecting Gentile Christians to get circumcised and commit to follow the law before they could be accepted into God's family. They knew that Jesus was the Savior and Lord who died for people's sins, but wasn't the law necessary to make people right with God? To create the covenant community? How could the people of God function without it?

Paul explained that the law was a guardian, but it was no longer needed. The same Spirit that brought freedom from the penalty of sin brings freedom from the burden of the law.

As you read our passage this week, consider the concerns that Paul is likely addressing. How is he helping people understand how to live without the law, then and now? What does this mean for how God's people function as a family?

Read

Galatians 5:13–26 (NIV)

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

- Imagine what your life would be like if you walked in the Spirit and did not gratify the desires of the flesh as described in verses 19–21. How would your life change if you exhibited more fruit of the Spirit? How would it affect your relationships with God and others?

Respond

I once heard a seasoned Bible teacher describe passages as either canyon passages, ditch passages, or somewhere in between. A passage can be difficult to interpret and apply for all kinds of reasons. Maybe we need to understand some of the history of the time or get input from another part of the Bible to really understand what's being communicated. Those are canyon passages because the context is so far removed from our own that we have to build a bridge. We've definitely had a few of those passages here in Galatians.

Some passages are more like a ditch. What's being communicated is as clear to us as it was to the original audience. Getting from meaning to application it is more like stepping over a ditch. I think that describes this week's passage fairly well. We'll need to define some terms this week, but for the most part, Paul's message is clear. Our questions will center on *how*. How do we walk in step with the Spirit?

I want my life to be characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. I want to live like someone who belongs to Christ and doesn't indulge desires that are outside of God's goodness. How about you?

Let's commit to upping our prayer time this week, and seeking the Spirit. Let's encourage one another. Talk about this passage with someone and think through the *how* together. Don't let this opportunity pass you by.

Day 2

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There is an old saying that, depending on when and where you grew up, you may have heard, "When the cat's away, the mice will play."

The idea is that without some kind of menacing force prowling the area, people will do what they want. If the boss is out, the employees will goof off. If Mom and Dad aren't around, the dishes will never get done. If the teacher is out of the room, students will talk and not work.

Although not a perfect analogy, this was part of the concern that Paul's opponents had expressed. Without the law, what's going to keep people in line? In this passage, Paul wants the Galatian Christians to consider a different question. What if it *didn't* take a menacing force to get people to do the right thing?

Read

Galatians 5:13–18

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to

do whatever you want.¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

- Based on Paul’s warning in verse 15, what do you think was going on in the Galatian church?
- In practical terms, what do you think it means to be led by the Spirit?

Reflect

If we think about how this section of Galatians fits in with the rest of the letter, we could say that Paul is answering the question he posed in 3:3 – *having begun by the Spirit, do you now come to completion by the flesh?* His answer is no, you are made complete in the faith the same way you entered it — by the Spirit.¹

Think of it this way, believers have received an amazing upgrade to the law beyond what they could have ever imagined. The Spirit of the living God has come to rest on his people. So of course, as Paul makes clear in verse 13, being free in Christ is not a license to sin. That wouldn’t be of the Spirit. The Spirit will lead us away from self-indulgence, to love and serve others. Freedom is for love.

In verse 15, Paul describes the Galatians’ behavior in vivid terms. They were biting and devouring each other like wild animals fighting over food. It’s not surprising that because the message of Paul’s opponents so thoroughly contradicted his own, the Galatian church erupted in conflict. What might surprise us is that Paul does not cheer on the fight. He doesn’t marshal supporters, or ask his “side” to come to his defense. Instead, he tells the Galatians to love and serve one another.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he replied simply, love God with your whole being. He followed with “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:36–40). From the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), we know that “neighbor” is not just people who are like you and live nearby and also that love is more than a sentiment. To love is to relentlessly pursue the good of another, even when it costs you something.

Here Paul echoes Jesus. This is the law the Galatians need to follow in their conflict and strife. By doing this, they will fulfill the entire law. Love your neighbor as yourself. The Spirit opposes the flesh and all the selfish, self-indulgent desires that turn us in on ourselves so that we either disregard those around us, or end up using them. It’s Spirit empowered love, and not a shared ethnicity, circumcision, or following the same food laws that forms a covenant community. Likewise, for us it’s not a middle-class suburban lifestyle, shared politics, or preference for contemporary worship music that makes us family. It’s our humble service and love for one another. As we are led by the Spirit, we will be led to love.

Respond

¹ Gordon Fee, Galatians, 200.

How could a closer walk with the Spirit keep you from gratifying the desires of the flesh? What do you think it means to walk in the Spirit? Have a meaningful conversation with a fellow Christian and discuss this. Get practical and encourage one another.

Take time now to invite the Spirit to lead you in everything you do. Ask him to empower you to love others, particularly in areas of your life where there is conflict.

Day 3

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In the Internet age, there is no shortage of “how-to” websites, articles, and videos. You can get step by step instructions on everything from frying a Thanksgiving turkey to changing the battery in your car’s key fob. It takes all the guess work out of a task when you have easy-to-follow directions.

Unfortunately, there are no step by step directions for the larger issues in life. There’s godly wisdom and advice, but there is no pastor, scholar, influencer, or author who can guarantee that their steps will lead to a happy and holy life. Anyone who promises those results is in danger of repeating the Galatian error, because what they are advocating is a life under some kind of “law” rather than under the direction of the Spirit.

That being said, we aren’t without guidance. There are things in this world that are clearly against God’s will, and Paul is going to list a few of them in Galatians 5:19–21, the verses we’ll look at today.

According to commentator Walter Hansen, these specific lists of vices, (and virtues that will follow in 5:22–23) “are not offered as a new set of specific codes to replace the law codes. Rather, they provide an objective basis for evaluation, so we can determine whether we are living to gratify the desires of the sinful nature or living by the Spirit.”²

I’m going to repeat some of the verses we looked at yesterday so we remember the flow of Paul’s thought as we move into verses 19–21.

Read

Galatians 5:19–21

² G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Ga 5:19–21.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

- What do you notice about the “acts of the flesh”? If you had to divide them up into categories, what would you label those categories?
- What is Paul’s warning?

Reflect

Paul seems to be emphasizing that the Galatians do not need the Mosaic law to define the nature of evil. Since in verse 18 he has just explained that they are not under the law, it would be strange if he now turned to the law for instruction. But, he doesn’t describe the activities in verses 19–21 as transgressions of the law. Instead he frames them in light of the kingdom.

These vices are incompatible with the character and lifestyle of God’s heirs who will inherit the kingdom (4:7). God’s children are in Christ (3:29). Although believers will still struggle with sin, Paul contends that those who allow these acts to take root so that they become a way of life are not God’s heirs.

Paul’s list of fifteen acts of the flesh can be divided into four categories:

(1) illicit sex (sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery). Not only are these sexual sins outside of God’s design for human flourishing, in the ancient world as today, they frequently involved the exploitation of other people to satisfy one’s self-centered desire.

(2) religious misconduct (idolatry and witchcraft). This would include any number of pagan religious practices.

(3) social conflict (hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy). All of these refer to the breakdown of interpersonal relationships. That Paul dedicates a large portion of his list to this category could indicate how fractious and contentious the Galatian churches had become.

(4) self-indulgent excesses (drunkenness, orgies or “wild parties” in some translations). These are sins of drunken excess. “In New Testament times, as in our own day, the abuse of alcohol

contributed to marital infidelity, child and spouse abuse, the erosion of family life, and moral chaos in society.”³

The flesh destroys. It leads to brokenness physically, mentally, relationally, and spiritually. Living in the Spirit means trusting in Christ and turning away from these acts of the flesh. Though we may still struggle, our posture will be to lean away from these vices, and not towards them.

Paul was not only citing behaviors forbidden by Jewish culture, Hansen points out that “his list of vices is similar to many lists in the ethical teaching of the Greeks and Romans of his day. Pagan philosophers often published lists of vices and virtues.” So when Paul says that the acts of the sinful nature are obvious, he means that much of this list was agreed upon by believers and non-believers alike.

We shouldn’t consider this a comprehensive list of vices, merely a representative one. At the end of the list he says *and the like* to indicate that there are others left unnamed. “The huge difference between Paul and his contemporary pagan philosophers is not the content of the list of vices but the context: Paul gives the list in a context that offers the way to freedom from these vices; the pagan moralists were not able to offer any such solution to the rampant immorality of their day.”⁴

The Jewish moralists, along with these Greco-Roman moralists, believed there was some capacity to fight off such inclinations to sin. The rabbis contended that every human being had “two desires: the *yetser tob* and the *yetser hara* (the good impulse and the evil impulse).”⁵ The good impulse could be strengthened by repentance and the study of the law. Paul is offering a far more powerful ally, the Holy Spirit.

If we have committed ourselves to Christ, we are in Christ, wholly accepted and righteous before God. We are no longer under bondage to desires that lead us from God. By the Spirit we can have freedom from sin!

Respond

Be honest with yourself and God. Are you struggling with any of the vices listed? Confess that to him right now and repent. Receive his grace and forgiveness through Christ. Know that your Father loves you and has better for you. Is there someone in your life you can turn to for prayer, accountability, and encouragement? Seek them out and have a meaningful conversation.

³ Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 397.

⁴ G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Ga 5:19–21.

⁵ Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 264.

Consider coming to [Re:Generation](#) at Christ Fellowship — a discipleship ministry specifically designed to help people find freedom from destructive sin habits.

Day 4

Lisa Scheffler, author

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Too many Christians live as if sin has the upper hand. I confess that I sometimes act this way. Around me I see fear and abuse, broken relationships and broken lives. I see sin in my own life and watch those around me struggle. But in those moments, I need to shift my gaze. Sin does not have the upper hand, because as Christians, we have the antidote to sin.

In our passage this week, Paul is inviting us to see that a Spirit-empowered Christlikeness, lived out in loving servanthood with our spiritual family, is possible. The Spirit is sufficient for life in the believing community—over against both the law and the flesh, as God’s replacement of the former and antidote to the latter.⁶

Yesterday Paul gave us some examples of works of the flesh — destructive acts that the flesh can manufacture. Today, we’re focused on something that grows from the indwelling Spirit living inside of us — fruit of the Spirit.

Read

Galatians 5:22–26

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other!

- What do you think Paul means when he says that those who are in Christ have crucified the flesh?

Reflect

The fruit of the Spirit is the moral character developed by the power of the Spirit. The nine character qualities sketch for us a portrait that should be familiar — Jesus. Paul has expressed his desire to see Christ formed in the Galatian believers (4:19). Now he describes what that

⁶ Fee, 201.

formation looks like. These character traits are not a new list of laws or moral codes that must be kept; they are the result of living and being led by the Spirit.”⁷

We can’t produce this qualities on our own. That’s the thing with fruit. You can’t command it to grow, but you can cultivate it. You can plant, water, fertilize, and make sure there is plenty of sunlight. Ask any farmer, it’s hard work, even though it’s a process we can’t take credit for. Paul explores that tension here. We must walk in step with the Spirit, yet it’s the Spirit that produces the fruit in our lives.

Look again at 5:24. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.* Galatians 2:19 and 6:14 say that Christians have been crucified with Christ, but 5:24 says that they themselves have acted to put to death the flesh. We are not passive in our growth.

We resist evil by relying on the Spirit. We learn to say no to sin. We ask for his wisdom to steer clear of temptation and his strength and power to resist what we can’t avoid. But the Spirit is so much more than a defensive weapon. As we yield to the Spirit, he will bring our desires more and more in line with the Father’s. When we interact with others, he will give us eyes to see them as he does, hands that want to help, and mouths that want to bless. The more time we spend with our Father, the more we learn to trust and obey the Son, the more fruit the Spirit will bear.

For Paul, true living before God was a life in the Spirit and a life of spiritual freedom.

Respond

Spend some time meditating on the fruit of the Spirit.

Love, joy, peace, forbearance (or patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Read them slowly, out loud. Ask the Spirit to give you a synonym, an image, or even a feeling to go with each word. Write the words down. Work on memorizing them. Then ask the Spirit to produce this fruit in you.

Remember that fruit takes time to grow. My lemon trees had beautiful blooms on them last month and have just started producing tiny green fruit that will take from now until late fall to fully ripen. Looking at those tiny lemons reminds me that I have a lot of growing to do too, but that my father is a good and patient gardener who will produce fruit in me in his time.

Let’s all pray: *Spirit, hear my heart’s desire. I want to be more and more like Jesus. I want to see your fruit in my life so that I may bless others.*

⁷ G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Ga 5:22–26.

Day 5

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Happy Friday!

Let's reflect on what we've learned this week, invite the Spirit to transform us and commit to living out his guidance.

Reflect

Take another look at [Galatians 5:13–26](#)

- What are Paul's main points in this passage? How has it helped you better understand your freedom in Christ? How does the Spirit oppose the flesh? What is the fruit of the Spirit?
- What has stayed with you personally as you've studied this passage?

Connect

In your mind, picture a friend or family member who makes you feel really comfortable. They really know and love you. No matter what's going on around you, you're glad to be in this person's presence. What is this person like?

One person who comes to my mind is my Granny. Granny had this amazing ability to make you feel special. She welcomed and accepted you, so you always felt at ease. When she knew you were coming, she'd make your favorite meal. If you got there early, she'd ask you to lend a hand, but you never minded, because cooking with Granny often led to dancing. You see, Granny mastered the art of dancing and stirring at the same time. She had an eclectic taste in music, so you never knew if you'd be grooving to Elton John or crooning with Patsy Kline. I can still hear her singing about "walking after midnight."

When dinner time came and everyone gathered around the table, she listened to every word that was said, and truly cared about what people were sharing. Granny made you feel like you were her favorite person in the world, and it didn't even bother you that she had lots of favorites. When you had her attention, you had all of it. At Granny's table, everyone felt known and loved.

Though she's no longer with us, Granny has come to mind more than usual this week, because of Galatians 5:22–23. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (At least that's how I memorized them.) These are not abstract virtues, but manifestations of the Spirit's work in our lives.

The Spirit is transforming us into the image of Jesus, not so we'll become paragon's of moral virtue, but so we can love one another the way he loves us. So, let's "walk in step with the Spirit," "crucify the flesh with its passions and desires" so we can love our neighbors as ourselves. Imagine how different our lives could be if we cooperated with the incredible things the Spirit wants to do in us and in those around us.

Granny knew Jesus well and the fruit of her character and her life showed it. She shared the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that the Spirit cultivated in her. She couldn't help it and everyone who came to her table sensed it. Wouldn't we all like the same thing to be said of us? Wouldn't we all like to help others feel known and loved? The Spirit wants that for us as well.

Respond

Now slow down, pray over these prompts, and ask the Spirit to direct you.

Ask the Father:

- What do you want me to take away from what I've studied this week? What do you want me to remember and keep present with me?
- What do you want me to do with the truth of your Word? What is the one, next, right step that you want me to take?
- What are you teaching me about you? About who you are and the relationship I have with you? How can I worship and love you based on what you've revealed?

Pray about how you can more and more walk in step with the Spirit. What changes do you need to make in your thoughts or actions? Who can you have a meaningful conversation with about these changes?

Continue to pray for the fruit of the Spirit in your life and in the life of the church. Imagine a church full of people who were walking in step with the Spirit and whose lives were characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. What kind of difference could God make through us in our community? Could we see our vision become a reality because loneliness, anxiety, and addiction were reduced? Because people experienced Christ through us? Let's join together and pray!

Next week

We're getting closer and closer to the end of this amazing letter. You don't want to miss our final two weeks!