



Week 6: Freedom from Sin
Read Galatians 5

This lesson is about three things:

- Paul's transition to the second part of the letter
- The meaning of "the flesh"
- The solution to our slavery to flesh

At the Korean War memorial in Washington D.C., there is a low black granite wall surrounding a reflecting pool, on which is inscribed in silver a common American aphorism:

FREEDOM IS NOT FREE

It is a phrase that lifts up the two interlocking, but different, meanings of the word "free." Free meaning liberty, the Latin *libre* – the ability to choose to do what you want. And free meaning *gratis*, without cost. The Korean War memorial reminds us that liberty, the ability to choose our own way of life, comes with a cost, in this case the lives of those "who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." (From the dedication stone of the Korean War Memorial.)

Paul has spent four chapters detailing his argument that Christians are to be free of slavery to the Law, that it is by faith in Christ that we are made righteous by God. Now, however, Paul begins the second half of his letter, which reminds us that our freedom will cost us something. To say that we are free does not mean that there is no demand that goes with that freedom. Jesus tells us in the gospel of Luke that "to whom much is given, much more will be required." (Luke 12:48) The freedom we have in Christ will demand from us our self-centeredness. It will take from us our pettiness. It will take from us the power of our sin.

Let's review and summarize what we have learned from Paul in Galatians up to now:

- 1) Paul has received a special revelation from God, and his authority is derived from that experience. Paul has equal standing with the Jerusalem apostles. Our own stories and experiences are the foundation of our own beliefs.
- 2) Righteousness – being “right with God” – comes only by God’s grace, received through faith. It cannot come by religion – following the ceremonial law, or by virtue – following the moral law. The law once served as our guardian until Christ came, and now the law serves to demonstrate to us our need for grace.
- 3) Gentiles are made righteous the same way as Jews, by grace received through faith, and do not need to convert to Judaism first and follow Jewish law. Including Gentiles in God’s family is a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. God’s inclusion and unity are radical and cross all boundaries.
- 4) The apostles in Jerusalem and he have settled this issue of Gentile inclusion in previous discussions, based on the great things that are happening among the Gentiles with so many turning to Christ. The Jerusalem apostles will focus on ministry to Jews and Paul on ministry to Gentiles.

In the first part of the letter, Paul speaks about faith as the key to receiving the gospel. In this second part of the letter, Paul addresses the transformation that the gospel brings about in us, when it is received in faith. This includes 1) an exhortation to shed the old self, dominated by our lower nature – what Paul calls “the flesh,” 2) the Holy Spirit’s work within each of us individually, and 3) the Holy Spirit’s work within the community of faithful Christians.

A Bridge Illustration

Between the first and second parts of the letter is a section which serves as a bridge between “salvation through faith” and “life in the Spirit.” In verses 1-12, Paul argues vehemently that choosing circumcision does not lead to positive outcomes in a person’s life, and is particularly destructive in the church family. While the Holy Spirit will bring a positive result, striving to live by the law will bring a negative one. For Paul, this has been proven by the problems created by the circumcision faction in the Galatian churches. The dissension that has been created by these teachers is evidence that their teaching is not the truth, and that it “*does not come from the one who calls you.*” (Galatians 5:8). He uses an illustration we read in the gospels: “*a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough,*” (Galatians 5:9) meaning that these troublemakers bring problems that spread through the whole church family. Finally, Paul says that the agitators should “*castrate themselves,*” (Galatians 5:12) meaning they should cut themselves out of the community itself. The only solution to a destructive cancer is to remove it from the body altogether.

There is a bit of a baffling sentence in verse 11: “*But my friends, am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.*” Scholars suggest that Paul is responding to an argument, shared against him in his absence, that “even Paul believes that circumcision is required.” Eugene Peterson’s translation of this verse helps us understand: “*As for the rumor that I continue to preach the ways of circumcision (as I did in those pre-Damascus Road days), that is absurd. Why would I still be persecuted, then? If I were preaching that old message, no one would be offended if I mentioned the Cross now and then—it would be so watered-down it wouldn’t matter one way or the other.*” (Galatians 5:11 MSG)

In the midst of this bridge section are verses that lift up the basic themes of part 2 of the letter: “*For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.*” (Galatians 5:5) In this regard, the righteousness that Paul speaks about is not a right relationship with God, which comes by justification through faith, but rather the transformation toward righteousness that comes when our faith opens the door to the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying power in our lives, changing us so that we are transformed to be more like Christ. This is then followed by a verse that demonstrates how this faith shows up in our relationships with one another: “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.*” (Galatians 5:6). A few verses later, Paul writes what is perhaps the thesis sentence of the second half of the letter: “*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence (the flesh), but through love become slaves to one another.*” (Galatians 5:13).

We will deal more specifically with Paul’s understanding of love in our next lesson, and in two weeks, we will look in more detail at the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. In this lesson, we address the contrast between “the flesh” and “the Spirit.”

The Problem: The Flesh

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. – Galatians 5:16-17

The word “flesh” here is the Greek word “sarx.” Just as is the case in most words, sarx is used in different ways with different meanings and connotations in different contexts. Sometimes, it is simply used to mean a human being. For example, in Galatians 1:16, Paul says he did not consult any “*flesh and blood.*” Sometimes, it is meant to refer to the whole of humanity, such as in Galatians 2:16, when Paul says, “*by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.*” In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes of flesh simply as being his physical life: “*the life I live now in the flesh I live by faith.*” None of these uses of the term carry any negative overtones.

In chapter 5, however, Paul begins to use the word in a way that turns out to be important in his writings later in his ministry, which he develops in greater detail in Romans. Flesh, according to Paul, is that power and force within us and outside of us that leads us away from God. For the reader of modern English, many translators have used other terms to try to make the word have more clarity.

- The New International Version translates it “sinful nature.”
- The New English Bible translates it “lower nature.”
- The Today’s English Bible translates it “human nature.”
- The Common English Bible translates it “selfish impulses” and “selfish desires.”
- The Message translates it “compulsions of selfishness” and “trying to get your own way all the time.”

Let's begin by clarifying what Paul does **not** mean by flesh. Paul is **not** saying that everything physical is bad and everything spiritual is good. This was the argument of some philosophers called "Gnostics" who were teaching in various places in the first century and later. They believed that everything physical, anything that can be touched, is not important at all. This view can lead to "asceticism," in which people deprive themselves of all sensual pleasures, including food and sex. Their view is "if it feels good, don't do it." Gnosticism can also lead to the opposite response: because the only thing that matters is that which is spiritual and not physical, one can do anything one wants. These folks were called "libertines."

Furthermore, some might think that when Paul speaks of "flesh" and "spirit" in opposition, he is adopting a Platonic view that we have bodies and spirits, and the latter simply make their home in the former. This view was growing in popularity, even among Jewish circles at the time of Christ, and it certainly permeates our western world today. We often think of our bodies as shells which we abandon when our spirits go to heaven. This is in contrast to the prevailing Jewish view the mind, body, and spirit all are one integrated unit. Indeed, the word for "spirit" in Hebrew is the word for breath – the life force that is part of the body. Paul's understanding of "the flesh" is neither of these views.

So what does Paul mean by "flesh?" First, Paul uses the term to mean "your own human strength." This follows logically from his argument about salvation by grace through faith. You and I will never be able to be right with God if we believe we can do so by our own strength of moral character or religious discipline and fervor. In Philippians, Paul says we should have "no confidence in the flesh" when referring to the party of circumcision – we will never be able to be confident in our relationship with God if we count on our own strength and will. It is interesting that when Paul refers to the flesh, he uses the term "works," which implies something we do by our own strength. This is the same term he uses when he speaks of the "works of the law." When he says, "walk by the Spirit" as opposed to the flesh, Paul is reminding us of the fruitlessness of trying to be good enough for God.

Second, the flesh for Paul is one component of Paul's understanding of the oppositional forces battling for control of the human will. Most views of the human being recognize this struggle within us. For example, modern Jewish teaching about human nature is that we are all created by God, inherently good, but also inherently free. Within each human being there are two impulses: the yetzer tov (good or beautiful inclination) and the yetzer ra (wicked or evil inclination). The yetzer tov is the moral conscience that reminds a person of God's law when one considers a specific action or choice. The yetzer ra is the impulse to satisfy one's own needs and desires.¹

Many of us learned in our high school psychology classes about Sigmund Freud's basic view of human nature. It, too, is a model based on inner conflict. He proposed that human nature has three basic parts: The id is the instinctual part of us that contains our sexual and aggressive drives, as well as hidden memories. The superego is the part of us that keeps the id in check by conscience and guilt, aspirations and dreams, and by societal expectations. The ego is the conscious will that stands between the id and superego, trying to manage the self between these two competing forces. I hasten to add that Freud's basic view of life itself was atheistic and secular, rejecting any moral imperative in the universe other than negotiating between our personal drive for pleasure, our desire to have some meaning and purpose, and our response to basic societal expectations.²

¹ - George Robinson, *Essential Judaism* (Pocket Books, 2000)

² Jacob Arlow, "Psychoanalysis," *Current Psychotherapies*, ed. Raymond J. Corsini. (Peacock, 1970)

In these verses in Galatians, Paul describes a snapshot of human nature that has similarities to both modern Jewish teaching and that of Freud. It too is a multifaceted model based on inner conflict. The terms he uses are:

- **Flesh** – the seat of all of our selfish desires. This is similar, although not exactly the same, as Freud’s id. Among the distinctions is that for Paul, all physical desire is “of the flesh.” The desires within us are God-given, and are as much a part of our higher nature as they are of that lower nature. The flesh seeks to use those desires in selfish ways. The Spirit seeks to use them in ways that honor God.
- **Law** – the disciplinarian that has tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the flesh in check.
- **Spirit** – the presence of God available to each of us. Unlike the Law, the Spirit does not simply keep our selfish impulses in check, but crucifies them within us. We see this in the will, which chooses slavery to either one of these.

We find an expanded conversation about human nature in Romans 6 and 7. Consider the following from Romans 6:

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. – Romans 6:12-14

And from Romans 7:

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin. – Romans 7:14-25

What we see is Paul using all sorts of terms in various ways, which can be confusing to many who seek to understand a scientific or ordered structure of human nature. Are we slaves to sin, or the Law, or to law of

sin, or to the flesh, or to evil, or to death, or to all of the above? Is the law of God the same as the Law? What is the “law of my mind?” And where does the Holy Spirit fall in all of this? As frustrating as this can be, we must remember that Paul is not trying to build an ordered theology of human nature, but rather “*the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these*” to convince people that a simple commitment to obedience will not make us right with God, and that a desire to be obedient is impotent to bring real change and transformation. There is a force to which we have submitted ourselves, because we are sinful, that controls our thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. Call it what you will, but our cry goes out with Paul: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from the body of death?” He lists the outcomes (the works) of those who strive by their own strength to beat these selfish impulses. (Galatians 5:19-20) Note that that these symptoms fall in two basic categories: a lack of personal holiness, and dissension in the community.

The Solution: Life in the Spirit and Crucified with Christ

Live by the Spirit

Verse 5:16 can be troublesome if it is translated as the NRSV translates it: “*Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.*” It would appear that Paul is simply telling them to “stop that!” Yet, he has already made a good case that you can’t do that simply by deciding to do so. Many scholars have pointed out that the second half of the verse is an “emphatic future negative, conditional on the previous clause.” (No, I don’t really know what that means either.) Their point is that it should be translated, “live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” The solution is not to simply “stop it,” but rather to allow the Holy Spirit to take over your life.

I remember when “Just Say No” and its corollary “Say No To Drugs” was a part of the U.S War on Drugs campaign in the 1980’s. Youth organizations and schools participated throughout the country. As a pastor, I was supportive. But I also realized that our young people needed (and still need) to do more than just say no. They have to say yes to something, to allow something to take hold of their hearts and propel their dreams. In faith, we say yes to God’s offer of grace, and we are made right with God. That same yes opens us to the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about transformation, sanctification in our lives.

It is important to note that Paul uses a different word when dealing with the Spirit than he does with the flesh. The symptoms of the flesh are “works.” But from the Holy Spirit, we get “fruit.” It is an agricultural, botanical image. It is gradual. It can be cultivated, but not created. It can be facilitated but not forced. The Spirit can be welcomed, fed, nurtured, but not bought or purchased through the right prayer or well-designed worship service. In the book of Acts, there are three verbs that are primarily associated with the Holy Spirit. The first is “anointed,” or sometimes translated “poured out upon.” The origination and impetus belongs to God. The Holy Spirit isn’t summoned. The second verb is “received.” The people “received the Holy Spirit.” It was a gift given to them, which they openly accepted. Finally, the Scripture says the people were “filled with” the Holy Spirit, transforming every aspect of their life and being.

One other very important distinction must be made between flesh and Spirit. Flesh is internal, originating within each one of us. The Holy Spirit begins externally. It is given to us by God, through grace, and the church signifies that grace offered to us through baptism “through water and the Spirit.” Through faith,

we fan the pilot light of the Holy Spirit into flame, and the flame begins to take us over. The fire of the Spirit burns as fuel to power us, and a refiner's fire to cleanse us. It guides our every move and every decision, as we are "led by the Spirit." The process of sanctification transforms us, and the works of the flesh are replaced by the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Crucified the Flesh

But Paul calls upon a different image when he talks about the flesh. He says that "those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." We have not done it ourselves, but because Christ was crucified and we belong to him, our passions and desires are crucified along with him. Paul uses a similar image in chapter 3, when he says, "*it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was martyred in the struggle against Nazism, wrote a treatise called "Temptation." In it, he says that in Scripture there are really only two significant stories of temptation. The first is Adam. Adam failed that test. The other is Jesus, when he is tempted and tested while fasting in the wilderness. Jesus passed that test. Bonhoeffer concludes that when temptation comes knocking at the door, he won't send Adam (flesh) to answer the door, meaning he won't try to answer the door himself and send temptation away. That is doomed to fail. Instead, he will send Jesus, the Christ that lives in him, to answer temptation's knock.

I suppose all of us can identify with a battle of flesh and Spirit going on within us, each battling for control of our will. The best news is that Paul does not paint these as two equally matched forces, the outcome of which is yet to be determined. Instead, we are simply waiting, waiting expectantly for the already determined outcome to come to full fruition, where the fruit of the Spirit fully overcome the works of the flesh.

Sunday School Words

Spend enough time in church or with Christians and you will run across some words that we don't use frequently in our normal day-to-day conversation. However, these concepts are important for understanding Paul's letter and the Christian faith. Each week, we will examine a few of these "Sunday school words" so that they may shed light on the context of the lesson.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and has been present and working since creation. The same Spirit hovered over the face of the waters in creation, descended like a dove on Jesus when he was baptized, and rushed through the room where the apostles were gathered during Pentecost.

For believers, the Spirit has three functions – to guide, to grow, and to sanctify. Jesus refers to the Spirit as the *paraclete*, variously translated as advocate, counselor, one who intercedes, comforter, or one who comes alongside. Each of these functions allows the Spirit to be a guide in the lives of believers. Through the Spirit, Christians are able to experience the risen Christ as a constant presence in our lives in order to remember all of the things that Jesus taught (John 14:26). The Spirit is the way in which Christians can know God. In Romans, Paul says that it is the Spirit who makes it possible for God's love to be poured into the hearts of believers.

Christians grow into the character of God when they pay attention to the working of the Spirit. This attentiveness allows the Spirit to sanctify believers so that they are transformed into holy beings and drawn closer to God and become more like Jesus.

In Acts, the Spirit planted the church at Pentecost, and the Spirit has inspired the church throughout history. The translation of Spirit as “wind” reminds us that the Spirit is moving, not stagnant, in the lives of believers, especially those gathered together as the church.

Fruit of the Spirit

The Fruit of the Spirit is comprised of nine attributes (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) that characterize the life of a Christian. It is the outgrowth of the Holy Spirit manifested in one’s heart.

It is not borne of our best efforts. It is called the Fruit of the *Spirit*, not the Fruit of *Tom (or whomever)*. It comes only by abiding in God. On one’s own, it is impossible to produce perfect love, kindness, and so on. Just as saplings do not produce fruit, but rather it grows on established trees, the Fruit of the Spirit is produced in the lives of mature believers who have allowed themselves to be shaped by the Holy Spirit. It does not happen overnight, but is the product of a meaningful relationship with God.

Note also that the Fruit of the Spirit is singular – it is called “fruit” not “fruits”. When the Spirit is embodied in one’s heart, he or she will produce all of the characteristics as one fruit – not just one or two of them. Everyone has spiritual gifts that make him or her more inclined to a few of the characteristics, but embodying all of them happens when we live into the Spirit.

In Galatians, Paul contrasts the Fruit of the Spirit with the works of the flesh. Those works, including sexual immorality, hostility, quarreling, and jealousy, come from *trying*. On the other hand, the Fruit of the Spirit comes from *being*, from simply abiding in God.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What does it mean to you that freedom costs something? Dr. Pace gives the example of freedom demanding our self-centeredness, pettiness, and sin. What does it cost of you?
2. When Paul talks about the flesh, he means one’s own human strength. Have you experienced a situation in which your flesh, or strength, was in opposition to the Spirit within you?
3. What have the results been when you have tried, through your own human strength, to achieve righteousness? How does this line up with the “works of the flesh” that Paul writes about in Galatians 5:19-20?
4. Do you feel that you can send the Spirit to answer the door, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer recommended, when you are tempted? If not, what is holding you back?
5. What do you think of the assertion that the Fruit of the Spirit all grows together when it is really the Spirit at work in your life? Have you experienced this?

6. Which of the descriptors of the Holy Spirit (in the Sunday School words section) most lines up with the way in which you relate to the Spirit?



Week 6: Freedom from Sin

Daily Readings

Week 6: Day 1 - Matthew 22:36-39

Commentary: This week, we are taking a closer look at the Fruit of the Spirit and its nine attributes. We'll start with love. The Fruit of the Spirit is held together with love. Why is it the first and most important characteristic? Because it is what our highest calling is.

We are commanded to love one another with the love of Christ. Jesus said that the way in which Christ followers would be known was through their love. From where does this kind of sacrificial and endless love come? How can we begin to produce this kind of love? It comes from God. As 1 John 4 says, God is love, so all of those who know God know love.

Reflection Question: Is there someone in your life that you have trouble loving? When you think of them as a child of God, does it help you extend love to that person?

Week 6: Day 2 - James 1:2-4

Commentary: If someone asked you what makes you joyful, what would you say? Would you list all of the things that offer moments of happiness in the day? Sleeping late, a big cup of coffee, a glass of wine, a completed to-do list, a job that fulfills you, time with your kids, a good book?

When you are grieved, for whatever reason, it is harder to find joy in the things that are listed above. That's when you realize that we can't just summon joy from worldly things, but that it has to exist outside of our circumstances. As humans inclined towards anything easy or convenient, we can't see how to separate circumstances and condition from the emotions they provoke.

Joy is not a condition, but a consistent state that we can enter into by resting God's presence. As James notes in the scripture above, joy can co-exist with the testing of your faith and times of trial.

Reflection Question: Does abiding in God give you joy? Why or why not?

Week 6: Day 3 - Romans 8:22-25

Commentary: When we aspire to being patient, we often imagine that we will become people who wait peacefully and happily. Does patience sound pleasant in this scripture passage? (Remember, Paul mentions groaning and suffering labor pains).

The Greek word often used for patience in the Bible is makrothymia. It translates to Longsuffering, Slowness in avenging wrongs, Steadfastness, Forbearance. These are not all easy modes of being. They ask that we wait on God's timing.

Reflection Question: If patience means waiting on God's timing, how can we be patient and still stand up against injustice?

Week 6: Day 4 - Matthew 12:33-37

Commentary: Most of Matthew 12 tells of Jesus rebuking the Pharisees for their "goodness". Their self-righteousness and self-control was the fruit of hearts hardened by the law. Goodness cannot co-exist in our hearts if they are still full of selfishness and evil.

So how do we produce goodness? In John 15:5, Jesus tells us, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Goodness comes from abiding in Christ. When we dwell in Jesus, we cannot help but take on the characteristics and traits of Jesus – one of which is goodness.

Reflection Question: Use this space to confess to God and ask for forgiveness for the times in the past week in which you have spoken evil words rather than good ones.

Week 6: Day 5 - Hebrews 11:1

Commentary: It is important to distinguish the difference between faith and faithfulness. Faith is the conviction that Jesus is God incarnate and we find salvation in him. Faithfulness means remaining rooted in that faith, no matter the situation or obstacles. So our faith comes from knowledge of and trust in God, but our steady faithfulness comes from the Spirit.

We always think we need to "work on" our faith. We say, "Oh, if only I had faith like so-and-so." That puts the onus on us to maintain a certain level of faithfulness. But, as with all of the other fruit of the spirit characteristics, the fruit (in this case, faithfulness) comes from the Spirit abiding in us. It is not a fruit of our own efforts.

Reflection Question: How does it make you feel to know that faithfulness is a gift from the Spirit rather than something you have to develop by yourself?