

Galatians 5v13-26

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Imagine you find yourself shipwrecked on a tropical island, a bit like *Lord of the Flies*, or *Lost*. There's a whole group of you on the island, completely cut off from civilisation. You've suddenly been set free from the laws you've been forced to live under for years. How are you going to govern this new society you find yourself in?

Well there are a couple of obvious choices aren't there. One option is that you make up some rules for yourselves to live by. Although you don't have to follow British law any more, maybe you adopt it anyway, because you think it's the best foundation for living. Another option would be to just go crazy and let everyone do whatever they like. After all, if there are no rules any more, surely that gives you license to do everything you've always wanted to do, but were never allowed to.

I'll leave it to you to think which one you're more likely to choose. But what has that got to do with this section in Galatians? Well this is the kind of choice Paul, who wrote this letter, is talking about here. Paul the apostle is writing this letter to the Christians in Galatia, now part of Turkey. And OK, they might not have been shipwrecked on a desert island, but they've been set free from their former way of life. And Paul writes to them because they're having difficulties working out how to best make use of that freedom.

Paul explains that there are three ways to live (we've thought about two of them already):

- **Law**
- **License**
- **Life by the Spirit**

The Galatian Christians had started well. When Paul went and told them about Jesus, they'd accepted the message. But now other people were coming along and telling them that they needed to **do** more.

They said that just to believe Paul's message wasn't enough. They said that new Christians needed to follow the rules that the Jewish people had been following for centuries. In particular, these teachers have been telling the Galatians that they need to be circumcised if they really want to be God's people.

Paul **hates** the idea. He says, "*I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*" If they're teaching this rubbish, I wish they'd go all the way and cut the whole lot off! Why is Paul so angry? He's angry, because the idea goes completely against the gospel message, the good news about Jesus, that he preached to them (that he preaches to everyone).

The gospel is all about freedom. Paul preached that people are separated from God. They've turned their backs on the God who made them and who cares for them, and decided to live their own way – it's the ultimate crime, which the Bible calls sin. And it *looks* like freedom – *we're free from having to live the way HE says!* But that isn't freedom at all. You think you're free, but actually you've just put rubbish things in God's place – for the Galatians it was made-up Gods. Things we live and work for, but things that will never satisfy us. It's not freedom at all.

But, Paul would have told them, Jesus changes all that. He lived as one of us and died for us, so that things could be put right between us and God. We committed the ultimate crime in rejecting God; Jesus makes the ultimate sacrifice to pay for it. We deserve the punishment, and there's nothing **we** can do about it. But Jesus could. And if we trust him, we can be set free. We're able to join God's family and live as we were created.

I don't know if you saw on the news over the past couple of weeks those dolphins that keep swimming up rivers and getting stuck. Well, imagine I decided I was going to do something about it. I'm very environmentally conscious - I'm going to set the dolphin free. So I lift it out of the water, take it to the top of a building and throw it off. No! That would be ridiculous, wouldn't it?! That wouldn't be freedom for a dolphin - I need to set it free in the way it was designed, and put it back in the sea. That's the kind of freedom the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus brings – the freedom to live as part of God's family, the way we were created.

But now these other teachers were coming in and saying “*that's not enough. You need to have an operation to be properly accepted by God. And there are a whole list of other things to do too. Just trusting Jesus isn't enough.*” And the Galatians were starting to believe it. They were set free by Jesus, but in their freedom, they decided to start following rules. So he warns them, back at the beginning of chapter 5, “*it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*” Once you've had the burden lifted, don't willingly carry another!

Some people (maybe you're one of them) see Christianity as a list of rules to follow, but it should be just the opposite. Christians are set free. Set free from sin and its effects. Set free from having to follow rules to get close to God. We don't have to make ourselves good enough for God. He's done it all in sending the Lord Jesus!

Maybe you don't know what that kind of freedom is like. Are there things that you're a slave to? Well, if there are, then you should know that the Lord Jesus died so that *you* can be set free.

This freedom is amazing, but we invent rules and standards, because the gospel sounds too outrageous. *Surely there's more to it?! Maybe we don't demand that people get circumcised (I'm not sure how we'd enforce that...), but we might as well if we start expecting people to dress a certain way, or act a certain way, or to come from a certain background. This freedom is open to all, because it's based on what Jesus has done, not on what we've done!*

So, one of the options when faced with this kind of freedom is to go back to **Law**. Paul has spent most of his letter to the Galatians, up to where we read, smashing that idea to pieces! But, of course, that raises a question: everything we do wrong has been paid for by Jesus. So does that mean we're free to do what we want? It's the other *Lord of the Flies* scenario isn't it – go off and live how you like, because there are no consequences. It's the second way to live that Paul describes, which I'm calling...

License

By which I mean, license to do whatever you like. Paul sees a risk that the Galatians may well slip into this. In verse 13 he says, “*you, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*” The “sinful nature” sounds like a weird bit of jargon (and I guess it is). What he means is, the bit of us which would naturally turn away from the way God wants us to live. If we're left to our own devices, we'll eventually go back to our rebellious ways. It's in our nature. But, just because you're free, don't go and do what comes naturally, Paul says. Don't indulge that part of you. Do what doesn't come so naturally – serve one another in love (which was presumably something which they weren't very good at).

Down in verse 19, Paul explains what the acts of the sinful nature are. He says they're obvious. I think there are two ways they're obvious. They should be obvious to you if you're a Christian (which the Galatians were), because they're all things God hates. And we have no excuse for being ignorant of them, because they're written down for us. But you don't have to know much about God

to see that these things are wrong. Would you want to be friends with someone like this? *Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry (that is, worshipping other things in God's place), witchcraft. Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like.* It's hard to read this without squirming, isn't it? I don't think there's a single person here who's above these things.

And notice two things about the list. Paul calls them *acts of the sinful nature*. Some of these things aren't what we'd consider *acts* are they. They're attitudes – *jealousy, hatred, impurity*. But this isn't just about the things people see – it's about our hearts. The other thing to notice is the words *and the like*. This is a list of examples. There are other acts of the sinful nature too, which are also obvious.

When we're set free, one option would be to go off and do all of these things, because the consequences have been taken by Jesus. *But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature!* Don't do it. These things are the opposite of the kind of life God wants us to live. If you're a Christian, they're inappropriate. They have no part in your life. If you're looking at the list and squirming, GOOD! I squirm when I read this list. But don't just look at it and think, oh well, it was probably just Paul being over the top. He wasn't!

You should be squirming. But don't take that too far and start to despair! **There's an alternative!** It's the third one Paul talks about in this section, and it's the one he wants them to take on board. He's told them, at great length, not to listen to people who'd have them go back to the **law**. And he's told them that doesn't give them **license** to do what they want. The third alternative, the one they should be aiming for, is...

Life by the Spirit.

Look at verse 16. *“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”*

The alternative is to **live by the Spirit**. What he means is, let the Holy Spirit help you to live the way God wants. When Christians trust Jesus, it's much more than just an agreement between two parties. It's more than just a ceasefire. God himself takes up residence inside every Christian. And while he's there he helps us to live more and more the way God wants us to live – basically to become more and more like Jesus. Bit by bit he cleans us up from the inside, so that, bit by bit, we start to live lives that please God. Paul is telling the Galatians to let the Holy Spirit clean them up.

And the Spirit is in direct competition with our sinful nature. Which makes sense doesn't it – our sinful nature wants us to do things which are opposed to God, and the Holy Spirit wants us to do things God's way. So they're in conflict. And that can make life difficult. *“They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want”* (v17). Both are at work, and sometimes our sinful nature wins, but the important thing is that Christians have an option!

So, what does this look like? What does it look like to live life by the Spirit? Is it just something vague and airy-fairy that we shouldn't or can't pin down? Absolutely not! Look at verse 22. Paul lists nine qualities, which he calls the “fruit of the spirit.” And there's a reason he calls them fruit. Fruit proves the quality and health of a plant. An unhealthy tree won't produce healthy fruit. If the Spirit is there, certain fruit will grow. Simple as that. And what is this “fruit”? *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* These are good things – there's no law against them, like there

is against the acts of the sinful nature.

Just take a couple of seconds to look at that list. If you'd call yourself a Christian, which of those do you show? And have they been growing?

There's something important about this list too, which is hard to see in our English Bibles. Paul wrote this in Greek, and in Greek the word he uses for 'fruit' is singular. One fruit, not nine. Don't think of nine little berries growing on a branch, so we can be content with 8 or 6 or 2. They're like the segments of an orange, making up one fruit – a changed character which is being changed to be more like the character of Jesus. This is a whole-character thing, seen in these nine ways.

So don't be content with looking at the list and thinking “*well, I'm quite peaceful and self-controlled, but it's a good job because I hate her over there and I'd give her a slap if I wasn't.*” Or “*I'm a loving person, so I'm going to lovingly go and tell him that he needs to buck his ideas up or get out.*” That's not the fruit of the Spirit. It's acts of the sinful nature painted to look like the fruit of the Spirit!

This fruit will only come about through being forgiven by Jesus, and being changed by the Holy Spirit – you can't make this happen yourself. Look at verses 25 and 26. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. As the Lord Jesus was crucified, the sinful nature was crucified too. It's dead. Now we live by the Spirit, and if we live by the Spirit, we're to keep in step with the Spirit.*

The word he uses for 'live' by the Spirit can also be translated 'walk,' and that helps to see what he's on about. We aren't just following a different set of rules if we live by the Spirit. It's more personal than that. We're playing follow-my-leader, being guided by the Holy Spirit. Which is very different to keeping a set of rules with the threat of punishment hanging over your head. Isn't it? If we're Christians, then we're following where God leads, allowing ourselves to be moulded and shaped by following him. The bottom line is, this is about a **relationship**, not **rules**. It naturally flows out of that intimate relationship with God.

This isn't a list of things you can **do** to earn your way into God's good books. Both of these lists are symptoms, not diseases. They show what's going on underneath. People who do the acts of the sinful nature are turned away from God. Those who show the fruit of the Spirit can only do it because they've got God living inside them - they've been made right with God. This isn't about earning anything – the fruit grows out of what's going on in our hearts.

So, to wrap this up, what does it practically mean. This is all very well, but how can we make this fruit grow in our lives?

Well, at the risk of sounding like Alan Titchmarsh giving out gardening tips, here are a few practical suggestions:

1. It will take **the cross** – you need to trust Jesus first. This fruit will not grow if you don't. The fruit of the spirit will only grow in a changed life where you've been forgiven and brought into God's family. As this fruit grows, you'll become more like Jesus, so you need to trust him and follow him.
2. It will take **time** – it's tempting to look at this list and fall apart, thinking “I'm rubbish at all of them.” But think about it – when fruit grows on a tree, it starts from nothing and gets bigger. The fruit of the Spirit grows too, as we live our lives in step with the Spirit. It doesn't just pop into existence. It takes time to grow and ripen. The fact it's growing at all is the important

thing. So we shouldn't despair if our fruit is tiny, as long as it's growing. Equally, we shouldn't ever sit back and feel satisfied that it's finished growing!

3. It will take **God's word** – the way we keep in step with the Spirit is to know where he's leading us. We need to know what God is like, what makes him tick. He's made it easy for us to find out by telling us – in the Bible. I'm not telling you there'll be a fuzzy feeling or a voice in your head to keep you in step with the Spirit (although there might be). Read the Bible. The Bible is **the main way** we can see how we keep in step with the Spirit.
4. It will take **prayer** – the fruit of the Spirit only grows because of God's continued undeserved goodness to us. He made it possible for us to be forgiven in the first place, and it's His Spirit who changes us and makes the fruit grow. So we need to thank him as it happens and ask him to do it more.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” Don't throw that freedom away by following rules. And don't abuse that freedom by going off the rails. Instead, live by the Spirit. And *“since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”*