

**A STUDY IN GALATIANS**  
**Part 17 – “A Cross or a Crutch”**  
**Galatians 5:7-15**

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*You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! 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. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. (Galatians 5:7-15 ESV)*

The cross is a central focal point of the Christians faith. If your understanding of the Christian faith does not lead you to glory in the cross of Jesus Christ, you have become the victim of a serious misunderstanding. It is this point that Paul raises with the Galatians in verses 7-15 of the fifth chapter. It contains some of his sharpest language for the church and the false doctrine they were beginning to embrace. There is a strong warning that even a little false doctrine can be fatal to the Christian and his well being in his walk (v. 9). The word "leaven" is a word that Paul uses to describe the effect of the false doctrine in their midst. False doctrine works just like a pinch of yeast in the bowl of dough. It permeates and affects the whole bowl. The real test of any doctrine or philosophy is: where does it place the cross of Christ?

**NOTE:** We should consider briefly the offense of the cross. The Jew had a great deal of trouble accepting the fact that the Savior would have died on a Roman cross. It was reserved only for the criminal, and for the Jew this placed a curse upon the victim. Certainly the one to die this death could not in their mind be blessed of God... certainly not God's Son! It was almost unthinkable. Another problem for the Jewish mindset involved the fact that Jesus' death was not that He might become a martyr in Israel's fight for freedom against the Roman Empire. In every case, the death of Jesus is spoken of as atonement for sin, that mankind might have the means of being set free. It was indeed too much for a faithful Hebrew. How could he place his trust in the death of a Jewish man on a Roman cross to make him acceptable before God? It was a scandal to him, a stumbling block! And so it is for many of us today. We find ourselves unable to really believe that Jesus' death is enough. Yet the resounding call for all of us is that the Christian is a free man!

Zwiller's painting titled "The First Night Outside Paradise," has many details, though one in particular will speak volumes to you. Zwiller has set the scene immediately after the first man and woman have been expelled from the garden. Adam and Eve are preparing to spend their first night in the world of sin's cruel bondage of pain and death and look back to gaze upon the beauty of the Garden of Eden one last time. In the distance can be seen the angel with the flaming sword, but the eyes of the pair are not fixed on him. They are gazing far above his head into the heavens, and there, outlined in light, faint, but unmistakable - the artist has placed a cross. In wondering awe their eyes are fixed upon that!

Even though they were expelled from the garden, God had given them their answer for life - it has been, and always shall be the cross of Christ! **The calling of the Christian life is a calling to liberty. The objective of God in redemption was nothing less than setting man free!** He desires man to be free from the condemnation of the law and the bondage of sin. It is our choice: we can choose to limp along in our lives with the crutch of the law or to be set free by the Cross of Christ. God wants you to be free. Does that sound radical to you? It certainly did to first century Jewish ears. Since it was so radical a view, it was open to misunderstanding and misuse. It was this which called for the insights set forth in our text. **For us to understand our freedom we must have the knowledge of these two principles.**

### **First, Living In Liberty Is Not Living With a License (v. 13).**

Have you ever heard the saying, "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile"? It speaks of a basic truth about human nature. Paul recognized this when he gave the admonition, "only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh." Man has a tendency to abuse every good thing that God gives to him; it is a part of our sinful human nature.

I read recently in a little booklet the eight reasons why a woman buys something:

- Because her husband says she can't have it;
- It will make her look thin; it comes from Paris;
- The neighbors can't afford it; nobody has one;
- Everybody has one;
- It's different; and,
- Just because.

Just, because! Certainly all of us who have had children know that when you don't want them to do something that's reason enough for them to think they must do it! All of us are that way. When Paul spoke of liberty, it was a very simple conclusion for others to come to as they abused their freedom and lived in the sin of license. We should look at this verse in detail.

1. The word "occasion" translates a Greek word that literally means "spring board." It was used in military situations of a base of operations. The word indicates a "point of departure, a bridgehead, an occasion." **It is as if Paul is saying, don't camp out in sin.** Don't let Satan fool you into thinking that since you have now been saved that you are set free from the condemnation of sin, but you can continue to live in it. In fact Paul would say that being saved would mean that you could no longer continue to use that base of operations. There was a time when you lived in sin, but with the coming of Christ into your life change must occur. "Behold old things are passed away, all things are become new."
2. **The word "flesh" is the word Paul uses for reference to our sinful human nature.** It is that element within us which "opposes goodness, and makes for evil." In Paul's view we are still the possessions of "flesh" even after we come to know the freedom of Christ. Freedom in Christ does not include freedom from temptation, from the desires that are evil, or from an inward inclination toward the wrong.

Do you understand the warning Paul is giving to those new Christians in Galatia. It is the same warning we ought to hear and heed today. Let me see if I can give you an illustration from a hypothetical case. Let's imagine that a young boy named Joe becomes a Christian. He knows that Christ has set him free from the bondage of sin in his life; he has genuinely trusted Jesus and knows he is accepted before God through the finished work of Christ. One day at school he notices another young boy who always brings ten dollars to school with him and places it in his backpack during outside recreation time. It is unlocked and he reasons with himself, "I am set free by Christ from the law; I don't need to obey the rules to be a Christian. I'll just take that ten dollars."

Does that sound far-fetched? I can assure you it is not as far out as you might at first think! The law would regulate his behavior with these tempting situations and would prohibit any immoral behavior. But since Joe has reasoned he is free from the law he doesn't feel the need to be obedient. **Let me lay down the correct principle for you: Being free from the law does not give you a license to violate the great moral principles of the law.** Lying is still lying. Adultery is still adultery. Stealing is still stealing. None of this is changed. My freedom from the law simply means I am not dependent upon my obedience to the law to gain salvation and acceptance before God.

### **Second, Living In Liberty Is Living With Love (vv. 14-15).**

**"But by love serve one another." This is what our love leads to! It does not give us liberty to do what we please, but rather it sets us free to do what will please!**

1. **"To serve" translates the verbal form of the Greek word that means "bond slave," so literally the apostle declares that we are free to serve one another as slaves.** This points us to the form of our service. We are to serve one another in the manner that a slave would serve his master. I am to regard you worthy of my best service. The motivation of this service is to be love. My service must not be out of a sense of duty; not because I feel that it will create merit before God. Rather because we know that love that brings sacrifice. It is so much more than an emotional response; it is that I view you as being worthy of my sacrifice, your good becomes my chief concern in life.

When we celebrate the week of Easter, known as Passion Week in more ecclesiastical traditions, the Thursday before Easter is called "Maundy Thursday." This day of celebration before that time which marks the death of Christ and His resurrection from the grave is central in many denominations. It is so named from a Latin phrase, "dies manda'ti" (the day of Christ's great mandate). That day after Jesus had washed the feet of the disciples, and said, "A new commandment give I unto you, that you love one another" (John 13:34). **It is a lesson all of us could learn from Jesus. He has set us free not from but to service, prompted and initiated by love.**

2. Paul turns to the law for support in this principle, a very paradoxical thing indeed! For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." He points us to the most legal book of the Old Testament, and to the most legal sections of that book for a great statement. **What Paul is emphasizing is the same as the Lord did when he summarized the law in the Royal Commandment of Matthew's gospel. He who truly loves will fulfill the law.**

Let me see if I can make some practical observations of this principle:

- If you love your neighbor as yourself you will not commit adultery with his wife or daughter. If you love her as you love yourself, you will seek her good - not her body.
- If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will not steal your neighbor's property, but will rather protect it.
- If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will not destroy his life, but you will work to make it safe and productive.
- If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will not bear false witness against him, but rather you will seek to protect his good name.
- If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will not covet his goods, but rather you will be happy with his prosperity and work to make him even more successful.

Our liberty in Christ enables us to relate to our fellowman. Paul sounds a clear warning we must hear. He warns them that the bad relations they had been developing among themselves were a contradiction. "But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you not be consumed of one another." Their turning to trusting in the law for their acceptance before God and others had produced a selfish attitude toward their fellowman. There was a real danger of the whole fellowship being destroyed. The point is that though I am free from the law, I am not free to do anything that will harm or hinder any rather person.

At a meeting some young people were discussing the text: "You are the salt of the earth." One suggestion after another was made as to the meaning of "salt." In this verse, "Salt imparts a desirable flavor," said one. "Salt preserves from decay," another suggested. Then a Chinese exchange student in the class said, "Salt creates thirst." There was a sudden hush in the room. Everyone was thinking: Have I ever made anyone thirsty for the Lord Jesus Christ?

All of us know the standard answers, too! But do we know the answer that Christ is looking for? Would you look around today? Who is sitting in front of you? Who is on either side? Who is behind you? Do you love them? Have you done anything recently to serve them? Is there any person in this sanctuary today with a need you could meet? Is there anyone in this church, in this community with whom you have a bad relationship? I am going to ask you to do something today. I am going to ask you to commit yourself to do something this week that will be an expression of love to three people: to a member of your family, to a member of this church, and to member of this community.

Take a moment and think it through, be specific about it. I want you to be definite about this commitment. This would be a great week for you to learn the joy of serving your fellowman. It will give you a tremendous sense of freedom. Will you do it? I hope so. Let us pray.