

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	29		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 5:13-15		
Date:	October 18, 2026 (a.m.)		

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT (Part I)

How are we to live the Christian life? One very common approach is to seek to live under the binding yoke of *legalism*. What is legalism? Basically it is self-trust. The legalist trusts his own works or accomplishments as a means of earning God's favor, and unfortunately many true Christians fall into this snare. The other danger goes in the opposite direction. Antinomianism advertises a life of freedom from any moral restraint. This is very appealing to the flesh, but is simply license. The Apostle Paul adamantly rejects both. Instead, he sets forth a life that produces true liberty by the Holy Spirit. What is this? Well, first and foremost, the liberty of the Christian life is definitely *not* license. Mike Horton captures the matter, saying: "So we must beware of seeking a *balance* between legalism and antinomianism. After explaining the justification of the ungodly, Paul anticipates the logical question: *Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?* (Ro 6:1). The legalist replies to Paul's question, *Not on your life! Don't you know that if you still fall into sins – especially the same ones repeatedly – you either lose your salvation or never had it to begin with?* If our view of justification does not provoke this charge of antinomianism, it has missed Paul's point. Yet Paul clearly refutes any antinomian conclusion. He does not teach that one who is justified (i.e., has accepted Jesus as Savior) might nevertheless still be under the tyranny of sin (i.e., not having accepted Jesus as Lord). There simply is no such thing as a *carnal Christian*, one who does not bear fruit and may not even still trust in Christ. Instead, Paul's answer stands in sharp contrast to both legalism and antinomianism. He does not advocate balance between these extremes. Rather, he turns to the gospel as an alternative to both: *By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life* (Ro. 6:2-4, emphasis added). No one can be united to Christ's death, for the forgiveness of sin, without also being united to his resurrection life (vv. 5-6). We *have died* (a completed act in the past) and now *are alive*. So instead of issuing an imperative with a threat, Paul proclaims an indicative with a promise. The answer to the antinomian and legalist alike is the gospel. The antinomian has too narrow a view of the gospel, as if it were mere fire insurance – canceling our debt without actually marrying us to Christ – while the legalist turns the gospel into law. However, Paul returns to the gospel and simply announces that through our union with Christ by faith we have not only justification but sanctification. No one who is justified is in fact under the reign of sin and death. Drawing on the wide vista of this triumphant indicative, the imperative follows: *Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions* (v. 12)."¹

Likewise, listen to the words of J. R. W. Stott, "Christian freedom is freedom *from* sin, not freedom *to* sin."² I like the way the old Puritan Richard Sibbes put it: "Where this liberty from the Spirit is, there is not only a freedom from all gross sins, but likewise a blessed freedom *to all duties, an enlargement of heart to duties.*"³

- I. **THE CALL TO FREEDOM (5:13).** Paul's point throughout this epistle is very clear. Christians are not under the Law, but under grace, therefore, they are free. What does this actually involve?
 - A. **Freedom from the Curse of the Law.** Christ became a curse for His people, therefore, the Law can never curse them (Galatians 3:13).

- B. ***Freedom from Salvation by Law.*** All the work necessary to secure a perfect salvation has been completely accomplished by Christ – and this cannot be added to in the slightest degree by our works.
- C. ***Freedom in the Spirit.*** Believers are free in the sense that, in principle, they have the Law written in their hearts. They are under grace, not under the Law.

NOTE: Having said all this, one caution is in order. The Christian is not free to trample the Law of God under foot. The Law still functions as a safe and necessary guide to direct the believer. We live in an age which seems to be without moral standards. Words like *right* and *wrong* are no longer understood as absolutes, but are defined in a relative sense. “Legalism,” wrote E. F. Kevan, “is abhorrent to God and foreign to the Gospel, nevertheless, only by a Divinely-given delight in the Law of God can sanctification be rescued from the realm of the merely subjective and emotional.”⁴

II. ***EXHORTATION AGAINST LICENSE.*** The word translated *freedom* in v. 13 is *eleutheros*. It had a very strong social-ethical connotation in Greek culture. To call a person *eleutheros* not only identified him as not being a slave, it was also a way of saying that the individual displayed the qualities which were expected of a freeman.⁵

- A. ***The Abuse of Christian Liberty.*** Paul now makes clear that this freedom does not lead to carnal self-indulgence. The term *aphormē* was originally a military term and referred to the base of operations. In this case our freedom should not provide the enemy (the Flesh⁶) with a base of operations.
- B. ***The Pauline Antidote.*** If the tendency (and it is a very real one) is to misuse our Christian liberty as an excuse for loose living, then the only solution seems to be a stiff dose of Law. But Paul did not agree. “The principle of law was so completely opposed to spiritual freedom that it could never be enlisted in defence of that freedom: nothing was more certainly calculated to kill true freedom. The freedom of the Spirit was the antidote alike to legal bondage and unrestrained license.”⁷
- C. ***The Place of the Law in the Christian Life.*** The contrast between Law and grace, or law and Spirit (Galatians 5:18; 2 Corinthians 3:6), must not be misread. This contrast does *not* imply (as some Christians think) that the Law as written code inadequately expresses the contents of righteousness, and that the Christian should steer only by the compass of the Spirit (subjectively considered) in order to know the will of God. Paul would strongly reject such a concept. What does Paul mean, therefore, when he declares that Christians are not under the Law but under the Spirit? Simply this: we are not dependent upon the Law in regard to the *fulfillment* of righteousness, or the *doing* of God’s commandments. Rather, we are dependent upon the Spirit.⁸

NOTE: It is critically important to understand the difference between Law and Gospel. Mike Horton helpfully explains, “God speaks in two words: the law and the gospel. There is a danger in either confusing or separating them. The law commands and the gospel gives. The law says, *Do*, and the gospel says, *Done!* Both are good, but God does different things through them. The law is everything in Scripture that God commands. The gospel is everything in Scripture that makes promises based solely on God’s grace to us in Christ. When it comes to how we receive the promises, law and gospel are opposed, for we are saved apart from the law. The law condemns us, while the gospel is the good news that announces our justification that we are free for the first time to embrace God as our Father rather than our Judge. Lutheran and Reformed traditions distinguish three uses of the law: to expose our guilt and drive us to Christ, a civil use to restrain evil, and to guide Christian obedience. More generally, the New Testament frequently employs the terms law and gospel to refer to the old covenant distinguished from the new.”⁹

- D. ***The Fulfillment of the Law in the Christian Life.*** The Law is and will always be an expression of the will of God, and God’s Law requires that we love our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18, compare Luke 10:29 and Matthew 5:43ff.). Paul’s point is that Christians are set free to really

fulfill the Law, “only the way he fulfills the law is not by punctiliously observing rules and regulations of an external code, but by the new way of love, which is generated within the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: John Preston, one of the most influential of all the English Puritans, captured the essence of how the Law of God and Christian freedom go hand in hand when he likened it to marriage: “You must respect him as a Wife doth her Husband, not as a servant doth a hard Master: you must not look on his Commandments as a hard Task, whereof you could willingly be excused, but as one that hath his heart inflamed to walk in them: as a loving Wife, that needs not to be bidden to do this, or that; but if the doing of it may advantage her Husband, it will be a greater grief to her to let it lie undone, then labour to do it. . . . They that be humble, that have their hearts wounded with the sense of sin, are willing to take him on his own terms; to keep his Commandments, and not think them grievous. . . . Therefore, be not thou shy in taking of him, for you have free liberty.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ M. S. Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines For Christian Disciples* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 308.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (IVP, 1968), p. 140.

³ *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes* IV (James Nichol, 1863), p. 231.

⁴ E. F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: The Study of Puritan Theology* (Baker Book House, 1976), p. 14. He elsewhere writes, “The Puritans held that Christian liberty freed the believer, not *from* the Law, but *for* the Law; so that although he is no longer *under* the Law, he is, nevertheless, still *in* the Law. This, they taught, was freedom itself.” (p. 267)

⁵ Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 111.

⁶ The Flesh, *sarx*, does not, as the New English Bible translates it, refer to “our lower nature” (implying that we possess a higher nature which if left to itself would be intrinsically good. Clearly Paul knew no such higher nature. He saw sin as having pervasively affected our entire being.) *Sarx* sometimes simply refers to our physical bodies (1 Corinthians 15:50), but its predominant meaning is theological. It denotes not merely bodily passions and lusts, but primarily our fallen nature in sin and depravity. As such, the *flesh* or *sinful nature* embraces the evil desires of body and mind (Ephesians 2:3) and produces *evil works* (Galatians 5:19).

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 240.

⁸ H. H. Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Eerdmans, 1957), p. 71. This freedom, says Ridderbos, means that Christians now have the possibility to live with the aid of the Spirit in agreement with God’s demands as expressed in the Law (p. 76).

⁹ M. S. Horton, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God’s Story* (Zondervan, 2016), p. 128.

¹⁰ R. Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 247.

¹¹ As cited in E. F. Kevan, *op. cit.*, p. 229.