

Galatians 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Galatians chapter 5 We are 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, 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 offence 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 neighbour as yourself.

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

[1 : 36] For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. For these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Galatians chapter 5 begins with a verse summing up the force of the argument of the preceding chapter.

[2 : 58] Christ has set us free for freedom. And freedom is of little use if you use it to place yourself in slavery. The Galatian Christians had once been in slavery to idolatry and the physical elements in pagan religion.

However, they had been set free by the Spirit of Sonship. They ought not to turn to the Jewish law as an alternative master. It may not be as cruel as the bondage of paganism, but it remains a sort of bondage.

Indeed, now that Christ has come, turning to the Torah is much worse, because what was once a guardian instructing and constraining a sinful people prior to the advent of Christ, actually now functions as a rival to him.

For the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and to commit themselves to Torah observance as the way to enjoy standing with God, would be to cast away Christ and all that he represents.

They would have chosen to place their standing with God on a completely different foundation than that which was graciously given to them in Christ. They would have turned to the foundation of observant Judaism, cutting themselves off from Christ.

[4 : 01] And they would have committed themselves to observe the commandment, which ultimately would place them under the curse. However, the true heirs wait for the hope of righteousness. They look forward to the vindication of God.

And they do so through the Spirit, by faith. The reality that gives us standing before God is not the law or Jewish identity. It's the work of the Spirit. And the way that we live out this identity is not by Torah observance, but by faith.

For those in Christ, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, is ultimately irrelevant. Neither of these are the foundation upon which our standing with God rests. Paul doesn't condemn Jews for continuing to practice circumcision.

However, while circumcision was once the mark of a privileged Jewish status before God, in Christ it no longer functions that way. Both Jews and Greeks, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, stand before God on the same ground of God's grace in Christ.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything in Christ, because God's grace is given without respect to either. The Judaizers have diverted the Galatian churches from the right course that they were on.

[5 : 12] Their false teaching threatens to corrupt everything, as a little leaven can leaven an entire lump of dough. And Paul hopes by this point that the Galatians will recognise the danger of the Judaizers and remove them.

It seems that some had suggested that Paul himself still advocated circumcision. This was probably because word of the events of Acts chapter 16 verses 1 to 3 had travelled around.

Paul came also to Derby and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.

Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. The fact that Paul would circumcise Timothy seems strange to us, given all that he has taught in Galatians to this point.

However, his actions can readily be understood as an attempt to avoid placing an unnecessary stumbling block before the people to whom he was ministering. He had described this missionary policy in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 19 to 23.

[6 : 21] For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Timothy was Paul's son in the gospel, his close assistant.

Like Paul, Timothy was prepared to become like the Jews for the sake of winning them to the gospel. However, in getting circumcised, he was not seeking to found his standing with God upon the Torah and Torah observance.

Paul's whole point is that circumcision and uncircumcision are ambivalent matters with regard to our standing before God. So if getting circumcised will help you win over a few more to the gospel, which teaches that standing with God is not on the basis of the Torah, then go right ahead.

[7 : 33] There's no problem with it. Provided that you aren't putting a stumbling block in the way of uncircumcised persons by doing this, there's no problem whatsoever, because circumcision doesn't matter, and uncircumcision doesn't matter.

Paul makes clear that, even if he is prepared to have someone like Timothy circumcised, the fact that he is being persecuted on account of his message of the cross is proof that he isn't preaching circumcision.

If he were, he would just be a good observant Jew with a few divergent viewpoints, and would be of little threat to anyone. Paul expresses the wish that the Judaizers, so eager to cut off foreskins, would go all the way and completely emasculate themselves.

In so doing, they would come under the disqualification from the assembly of Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1. No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

Their situation then would better testify to their state relative to the people of God. Paul reiterates and sharpens the point with which he opened the chapter. The Galatians were set free for freedom.

[8 : 40] Christians have been released from bondage to the elements of the world by the Spirit, and need to use that freedom in a loving manner. Indeed, the law, with respect to its moral instruction, a moral instruction designed for a willful and flesh-governed people, is fulfilled in the positive command to love your neighbour as yourself.

And tis this love that the Spirit works in us. Should note here that Paul, while declaring the end of the Torah as something that sets Jews apart from Gentiles, is teaching that the Spirit fulfills the Torah in some other respects.

There is a movement from the external law addressed to rebellious flesh to a law written on the hearts that is now lived out as the positive expression of liberty.

This is akin to the movement from the restrictions that someone feels when they first learn a musical instrument, where they have to play particular notes, and they're given scales to practice, and all these sorts of things, and it feels like an external obstacle, an imposition upon the will.

But yet, as that instrument is learned, the freedom of the virtuoso can develop, for whom the logic of the music and the instrument he is playing is a means of freedom itself.

[9 : 53] It's a way in which he can willingly express his interiority. The debate about the Torah occurs against the backdrop of the fact that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, a statement with which Paul opened the epistle in chapter 1 verse 4.

The whole of the old order, whether lived out under the Torah or far from God in paganism, is lived out in the flesh, under the elementary principles. It's a realm characterised by sin, by death, by the passions, and by the incapacity to bring about life or righteousness.

Christ brings the new age of the spirit, where people can be liberated from the power of the flesh, whether experienced in bondage to the guardian of the Torah, or as Gentiles.

And the result of this liberty is a new way of life. There are ways, of course, that this is anticipated within the Old Testament. The law first comes in a primarily prohibitive and prescriptive form, but yet the people are told that they must meditate upon it, that they will learn wisdom from it.

And as they do so, a law that was primarily external to them, prohibitive, constraining, and an imposition upon their willfulness, becomes something that is within them.

[11 : 09] In the Psalms, we see this expression of the law from within. The law is no longer an imposition, but it has become the delight of the heart and is expressed freely from within. In the wisdom literature, we see a movement from the law as primarily external commandments to the principles of justice and the insight of those commandments being internalised and now expressed through insight into the way that the world works.

In the prophets, we see something even further. For the prophet, the word of God can be eaten, digested, taken into themselves, and then expressed like a burning fire from within.

What was once words on tablets of stone outside condemning, something that stood opposed to the willfulness of the person, has now become part of the person and a free expression.

The prophets, of course, particularly in places like Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, promise that the Lord will one day write his law upon the hearts of his people, that that law will no longer be an external commandment, condemning them, but it will be one freely obeyed from within.

And this is what Paul is talking about here. We should also observe the movement in the form of rhetoric between the old covenant and the new. Prohibition is the rhetorical form of the law, but the rhetoric of the spirit is one of persuasion because the law is being written on our hearts by the spirit and persuasion is a form of rhetoric that addresses people who have a strong apprehension of the good within themselves.

[12 : 38] Life in the flesh is characterized by rebellion and by all the impulses of untamed sinful nature. It's driven by our desire to dominate others, for instance.

When people live in such a manner, they will bite and devour each other. However, such people must beware as those who live by the sword will die by the sword. If they bite and devour others, they are at risk of being consumed themselves.

The order of the flesh is a social, not merely an individual order. It's an order that creates and sustains divisions, whereas the spirit overcomes and traverses them.

It is an order of dissipation and degeneracy, where people are enslaved to their lusts and passions. It's an order of hatred and anger. As those given the spirit, Christians must walk in the spirit.

They must starve the flesh. The spirit and the flesh are two powers to which we must relate, but the spirit, of course, is the greater of the two. If we follow the spirit, we will not just do whatever we want, as the spirit will direct us so that, although we are not under the law, we will be marked by the spirit's fruit.

[13 : 48] The flesh, the animating principle of the evil age from which we have been delivered, whether we were living under the law as Jews or apart from the law as Gentiles, has its distinctive and its characteristic works.

These are the works that the law constrained, but also, in other ways, provoked and revealed. Many of the works that Paul lists here are works that reveal people's lack of self-control.

People who remain under the rule of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God. The fruit of the spirit, by contrast, is completely different. Although we are set free by grace through faith, the liberty that we have received is lived out and demonstrated in a transformed manner of life that comes from the work of the spirit that we were given apart from any status that gave us claim on God.

There is a movement from unruly passions to self-control. Once again, these are not just about individuals. Communities that operate in the spirit will be characterized by these virtues, as we'll see in the next chapter.

The law has nothing to say to these fruit of the spirit. They're not produced by the law, but neither are they condemned by the law. Indeed, they live out the life to which the law always testified and pointed and declared, but which it could never achieve or give.

[15 : 06] The flesh is decisively dealt with in the death of Christ. Christians should die with Christ so that, as Paul said of himself, it is no longer they who live, but Christ who lives in them.

A question to consider. Can you think of any ways in which the rite of circumcision itself, rightly understood, anticipated and pointed towards Paul's message in Galatians?

