

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 31

Galatians – Part Four

Chapters 5 - 6

I. INTRODUCTION

Like Paul's other letters, Galatians is divided into two core sections. The first deals with doctrine and theology; the second has instructions for practical applications and Christian living. In Galatians, the first four chapters dealt with the core message of the gospel and the departure from that message by those in Galatia.

Paul set forth with great clarity the good news that man stands right before God not by man's efforts, but from the righteousness that God accredits to those who put their trust/faith in Jesus Christ's atoning work. Paul counters the teaching that the Gentiles must become "Jews" (at least in the sense of being circumcised) before they could become Christians. Paul then puts this truth into instruction and practical living in chapters five and six.

Chapters five and six contain man well known passages that convey great spiritual and life changing truths. These passages are each deserving of a good bit of meditation and consideration. As we look through the two chapters, we will not only note those more famous passages, but also keep them in the flow and context within the chapters overall.

II. CHAPTER 5

What we have labeled as chapter five (remember, chapter and verse divisions did not come around for hundreds and hundreds of years after Paul wrote), Paul begins explaining the freedom we have in Jesus Christ. This freedom is critical to our Christian walk. Paul explains the freedom with reference to circumcision, but extrapolates it to the much larger picture at issue: righteousness from works or faith.

Paul explains that Christ has set us free so that we could be free from the law's obligations. If one seeks right standing before God by "pleasing Him" or by obeying even a smidgen of the law, then one would need to obey the whole of the law. The one will stand right before God. Then, God will acknowledge himself pleased with one's life. However, the commission of even one sin (for indeed, it was merely one sin of

disobedience that resulted in the fall of man in the first place) sets man at a place where pleasing God is impossible.

Moreover, by trying to please God through works, even something as core as circumcision, means that Christ's death is useless. One who seeks to stand before God by works, is one who has "fallen from grace" (5:4). Such persons who try "to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ" (5:4). In contrast, Paul notes that the righteousness we await is found by faith through the Spirit (5:5).

Paul explains that circumcision is of no value in this equation. The only thing of value is "faith expressing itself through love" (5:6). This short phrase sets forth a truism worthy of thought. Paul wants the Galatians to realize that faith produces actions, and those actions that stem from belief and trust in our sacrificed Messiah have love at the core. Love is the motivator and the compass. It is first and foremost the love of God that brought the sacrifice of Christ initially. And, we then love him because he first loved us. This is a love that goes beyond our relationship with God; it encompasses everything we do. It is why we obey our Father, it is why we build up and encourage each other.

Paul pauses for another moment questioning why the Galatians ever left this core teaching. Paul has very distasteful and graphic wishes for those who would mislead the Galatians into thinking that they had work to do to earn God's pleasure (5:7-12).

In recognizing this freedom, Paul doesn't leave the subject without first reinforcing the purpose for our freedom. Paul understood clearly that Christians are set free from the bonds of Satan and sin so we can live lives of love and righteousness before God and man. In other words, Jesus never came so that we could sin without consequence. The death of Christ was never meant to facilitate a life of wickedness and sin. Our faith itself screams the opposite. Our sin is so horrific that Jesus had to endure indescribable death to absolve us from the consequences. What kind of people would believe that, trust in that, but then live without regard to sinfulness?

So, Paul explains that our freedom is never to indulge our sinful nature. Instead, we are free to serve one another in love – in other words, to live as Christ himself. Paul emphasizes the summary of the law in one command: "love your neighbor as yourself" (5:14).

To live by this love and faith is to live by the Spirit. It is opposite in desire and effect of living by the sinful nature. The sinful nature is in conflict with the Spirit. One is destruction and sin while one is love and Godliness. Paul explains the “acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (5:19-21). Those living in this way will not be inheritors of the kingdom of God.

In saying this, is Paul turning 180 degrees from the teaching of the previous 4 1/2 chapters about salvation by faith and not works? No, of course not. Paul is merely noting that one who embraces and lives a life with these acts as the central behavior model are not those who have put their faith in Christ. If these acts are the desired dwelling of people, then those people need to carefully examine whether they have, in fact, put their faith in our sacrificed Savior.

Paul then contrasts this fallen lifestyle with that lived by the Spirit. In doing so, Paul describes the life by the Spirit as one of fruit. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (5:22-23). These are results of the Spirit’s work on the inside. Like fruit, they grow from the inside out. The key operative word is “grow.” These are not immediate results of the salvation walk with Jesus. These are the traits and characteristics that begin to grow within us as Christians.

We are to live with our sinful desires crucified along with our sinful nature. We are to walk in step with the Spirit, avoiding conceit, envy, or provocation of others (5:26).

III. CHAPTER 6

Paul advises the Galatians that when one is caught in a sin, the response should be one of “gentle” and careful restoration. Christians are to bear each other’s burdens, not add to them! This is common sense love. It brings service in the way of Jesus. Paul contrasts this life of service to one where someone thinks too highly of himself.

Paul urges the Galatians to realize that in life, there are certain rules. Much like “if you stick your finger in fire, then you will get burned,” in life a “man reaps what he sows” (6:7). This is a truism that should also motivate the Galatians (and us!) to carefully choose our options in life. We need to be people of love and service; people who live to advance our Lord’s

kingdom. We need to be people who sow to God at work in the world and in our lives as opposed to sowing to the destructive nature that was our downfall before Christ.

Paul notes in closing that even he finds no reason to boast in anything, save the death of Christ for his sins (6:14). This is a hard statement for us to put into practice. Living, as we do, in a capitalistic world where first place and success are measures of worth, we are to have a whole different value system. We are to boast only in our frailty and the love of Christ which covers the multitude of our sins.

With this, Paul ends his letter with a prayer of grace for the Galatians.

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Live Free – Not Bound By Sin Or Law
2. Live Free – In Faith and Love
3. Live Free – From the Sinful Nature
4. Live Free – Cultivate Spiritual Fruit
5. Live Free – Treat Others With Love
6. Live Free – Boast Only In Christ