



# THE FREEDOM TO SAY NO

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

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Galatians 5:15-26  
Sixteenth Message  
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In our series in the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians we have been studying the Christian's freedom in Christ in contrast to living under law. We have learned that the reason people live under law is that they might gain approval, love and acceptance through their performance, whether at church, school, work, or in the home. The key to our freedom as Christians, however, is our sonship in Christ—a standing that has been granted to us by God, through grace. As believers in Christ, we are sons and daughters of God; no longer are we to consider ourselves children or slaves.

In our last study we learned that the reason we are free is not that we might rush headlong into sin, but that we might fulfill the law by loving one another. As Christians, we have been set free to love. The question facing us now is, how do we do this? We may well understand Christian freedom on an intellectual and even a theological basis, but how do we work out this freedom on a day to day basis? How will sin be defeated so that we can love in a way that will fulfill the law of Christ?

We find Paul's answer to this question in the familiar passage to which we come this morning, Galatians 5:15-26:

**But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.**

**But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorceries, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, drunkenness, carousings, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall 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. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**

**If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.** (Gal 5:16-26, NASB)

The structure of this passage indicates that these verses are carefully crafted by the apostle. The text contains a number of statements that bracket a center line in the second half of verse 21, which emphasizes the fact that the kingdom of God is different from the kingdom of this world. Observing the text, we note the works of the flesh contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit. Verses 18 and 23 say that if we live in the Spirit, we are not under law; verses 17 and 24 discuss the problem with the flesh and the solution to the flesh; verses 16 and 25 are exhortations to walk by the Spirit. Everything that is said in this text is clearly put in the context of walking in the Spirit. But there is one more bracket: verses 15 and 26 are warnings to the Christian community to not bite and devour one another, and to not become boastful. Notice that the phrase "one another" is repeated four times, stressing the importance of community.

Clearly, the primary exhortation of the text is that Christians walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh. The Spirit (mentioned seven times) is the instrument of freedom in our lives; and the manifestation of this freedom is lives that are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. Once the law has led us to Christ, Spirit replaces law, and the Spirit fulfills the law. The exhortation is that the Spirit permeate everything we are and everything we do.

Even though the main principle of this text is obvious, we are going to spend two weeks in this passage. Today we will focus on the negative side of Paul's argument, i.e. his discourse on the flesh; next week we will focus on the positive side of things, i.e. the Spirit. This morning, then, our focus will be on the freedom to say no.

The flesh is the word that Scripture uses to describe mankind's natural, fallen human nature. The lusts of the flesh are not limited to merely illicit sexual desires, but rather, all the sinful desires of our fallen humanity. Every person here this morning has a flesh, and everyone's flesh is ugly. No amount of makeup or designer clothes will change its nature. No matter what kind of car you drive or how beautiful your home is, you cannot mask the fact that your flesh is unpleasant and nasty. Nothing you do will change its basic nature. Eugene Peterson describes the flesh as a "life of passions and desires, a life of impulse and necessity, a life responding to signals from others, a life of captivity to internal compulsions. It is a life that proceeds along well-charted, predictable lines—copying what others do, imitating stereotyped behavior, expressing itself in a few senti-

mentalities mass-produced from the cliché factories of popular culture” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 167-168).

If we are truly going to live out our Christian freedom in love, we are going to have to deal with this manifestation that is called the flesh.

Paul says six things about the flesh that I want to draw our attention to, using a series of statements or principles. The first principle is this: The flesh and the Spirit are opposed to one another. In the words of the apostle, “the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (17). In contrast to the flesh, which we inherited at birth, the Holy Spirit is a gift which is given to us at our conversion. The flesh is who we are by natural birth; the Spirit is who we have become by means of the new birth. And the flesh and Spirit have contrary desires that contend with each other. Just like democracy and communism, or Republicans and Democrats, the Spirit and the flesh oppose one another. And if the flesh is in opposition to the Spirit of God, then it follows that the flesh is in opposition to God himself.

For example, in our text the notion of our loving one another is set in opposition to eating and devouring one another. These are incompatible activities. One is the work of the flesh; the other is what is produced by the Spirit. Paul says that if we are fearful that our freedom will lead to an increase in sin, we should rest assured that the Spirit will oppose the flesh. Freedom will not result in anarchy, in other words.

Here is the second principle: The only thing that can defeat the flesh is the Spirit. The law is powerless to accomplish this. Here and elsewhere the clear teaching of Scripture is that there is a connection between the law and the flesh, and the law cannot control the flesh. The law does not stimulate spirituality; it does not set us free from the law of sin and death. Actually, it has the opposite effect. The law, which is holy and righteous, only serves to stir up the flesh. Paul says that one is “not under law” to contend with the flesh in order to become godly. But if we put ourselves “under law” we won’t be able to accomplish what we desire, for the law is powerless to help us do the right thing.

This truth is obvious. We make laws all the time—laws to lose weight, exercise more, read more, avoid getting angry, etc. But we all know the ineffectiveness of imposing such laws on ourselves or others. We may succeed for awhile, but sooner or later the flesh will come to the fore. Ultimately, the only power one has against the flesh is the Spirit of the living God, not “tablets of clay.” The flesh is like Superman in that it has only one weakness. That weakness is not kryptonite, it is the Holy Spirit. The reason we are exhorted to walk in the Spirit is that if we do not, the flesh will dominate our lives, because law is powerless to control the flesh. Walking in the Spirit becomes the antidote to the possibility that freedom from the law might provide an occa-

sion or opportunity for the flesh.

Recently, a pocket door in my kitchen got stuck in a half-open position. No matter what I did, I couldn’t get it to fully close or open. I asked a young man from our singles group to help me with the problem. He put his hand in a certain place on the door, applied some pressure and, lo and behold, the door was restored to working condition. I smiled to myself as I thought about my studies in Galatians. The door was the flesh, I was the law (I could do nothing to fix it), and my friend was the Spirit: he had the power to fix the door!

This truth, that the only thing that can defeat the flesh is the Spirit, is not merely an exhortation, it supports a powerful argument by the apostle as to why living under the law is of no avail to the Christian. In 3:3, Paul asked: “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” In 2:15 through chapter 4, he argues that the law fails to make us righteous or acceptable before God. Salvation is the work of Christ, and it is one hundred per cent gift. But that is not all. Not only is the law completely ineffective in bringing about salvation, it is utterly ineffective in producing righteous behavior, the sort of behavior that conforms to the character of God now that we are Christians. The reason this is true is that the law is powerless against the flesh—and the flesh is opposed to God. Therefore, living under law in an effort to control sin and produce godliness is futile.

True Christian freedom is found in living under the control of the Holy Spirit. If we are controlled by anything else we will be living under law, because we will be controlled by our flesh, with its passions and desires, and this will draw us away from God and godliness. Having begun with the Spirit, we must realize that the flesh makes it necessary to continue in the Spirit.

Here is the third principle: Manifestations of living according to the flesh are easy to recognize. How do we know when we are living under law? Paul says the signs are obvious: We will manifest in our behavior the works of the flesh. The apostle lists fifteen signs to assist us. This is not a comprehensive list. In other passages, certain behaviors are mentioned that are not mentioned here. But certainly this list is representative.

The fifteen items listed break down into four categories, the first of which deals with inappropriate sexual behavior: “fornication” (any kind of unlawful sexual behavior); “immorality” (impurity); “sensuality” (indecentcy, an open and reckless contempt of propriety).

The second category deals with misplaced worship, false religion: “idolatry” (the brazen worship of other gods); and “sorcery” (the secret tampering with the powers of evil).

The third category has to do with manifestations of an unhealthy society and the breakdown of personal relationships: “enmities” (quarrels); “strife” (a contentious temper); “jealousy” (envy); “anger” (fits of rage);

“selfish ambitions” (temper tantrums, canvassing for office); “dissensions” (factions, party intrigues); “envyings” (jealousies).

The fourth category has to do with alcoholic excess: “drunkenness” and “carousings.”

The fifth category includes “things similar to these” (this list is not exhaustive, in other words).

These, then, are the works of the flesh. This is what the flesh looks like.

Eugene Peterson puts these “works of the flesh” in everyday language, in these words:

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive and loveless sex, a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage, frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness, trinket gods, magic-show religion, paranoid loneliness, cutthroat competition, all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants, a brutal temper, an impotence to love or be loved, noisy bickering, small-minded and lop-sided pursuits, a vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival, uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions, ugly parodies of community. I could go on (*Traveling Light*, 149).

The majority of the sins listed, eight out of the fifteen, actually, have to do with the breakdown of relationships. Paul is not dealing so much with internal issues such as lust and covetousness, but rather issues involving community, because freedom is lived out in relationships. And the manifestation of freedom is healthy relationships, while the manifestation of living under law is unhealthy relationships that are dominated by the flesh. Thus it is easy to recognize the activity of the flesh.

The fourth principle is this: At a deeper level, manifestations of the flesh are a signal that something is wrong. When we see the works of the flesh in our behavior, that should tip us off to the fact that we are not experiencing freedom in Christ. Unhealthy relationships are signs that we are under law and that we are looking for our love, approval and acceptance in unhealthy ways. The works of the flesh tell us that we are not experiencing our sonship in Christ, a sense of being home and resting in our Father’s love. Here is how Henri Nouwen put this: “When I forget that voice of the first unconditional love, then these innocent suggestions can easily start dominating my life and pull me into the ‘distant country.’ It is not very hard for me to know when this is happening. Anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms and rivalries are the obvious signs that I have left home” (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 41).

If this is how we act, to compensate for our feelings of lostness, we look to the world and to the Christian community to give us love and approval, the sonship that we so earnestly desire. We live under law in order

to gain our sense of worth, and as a result, addictions replace freedom. We so crave love that we look for it in sexual perversion. We so hunger for it that we become angry with our spouse for not giving us what we want. When we see someone else getting the approval that we desire, we become jealous and resentful. Then we try alcohol to deaden the pain of not being loved or accepted. We deny the pain in our life by seeking to control everyone around us. At last we give up and say, “I’m worthless. I’m no good. I’m a nobody.”

All of these signs are indicators that we are not free, that we are not sons, and that we are trying desperately to find our sonship from this world and from people around us. As long as we remain on this treadmill we will be unsuccessful in the most important search of our life, even as Christians. Only God in Christ can give us the freedom to have healthy relationships.

I see this clearly now in my own life. When I get angry or depressed, I am immediately aware that I am not experiencing my sonship, rather I am trying to get something from someone else, without success. I am living under law and am manifesting the work of the flesh. That is when I need to draw near to the Father, to hear his voice say to me again, “You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased.”

The fifth observation is this: Living according to the flesh is incompatible with who we are as Christians. The center-line of the text is this: “those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (21). Basically, Paul is saying that the flesh belongs to an age of which Christians are no longer a part. This phrase gives us the perspective and the motivation to no longer live under the law, to live “according to the flesh.”

The kingdom of God has already come through Christ and it is available now through the Spirit in the life of believers. It is interesting to note that in Galatians, the law and the flesh are qualified by the same word, “works.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that they are similar, but it indicates that both categories of work, religious observance and sins of the flesh, belong to the past for those who are in Christ and who “walk according to the Spirit.” The works of the law cannot yield a righteous standing. The works of the flesh cannot yield a righteous character.

Rather, Paul is saying that the works of the flesh describe the behavior of unbelievers. The apostle states that those who “practice” such things, i.e. those who live this way, have no inheritance with God’s people. Both the flesh and the law are part of an age in which the believer no longer lives. The flesh is not just our fallen human nature; rather it is our life before we came to Christ, and a life that is outside of Christ. To live according to the flesh, then, is to live in keeping with the values and desires of life in the present age, a lifestyle that stands in absolute contrast to God and his ways.

Therefore, there is no reason for Christians to live according to this age. That no longer determines our identi-

ty. This world is the kingdom of those who do not believe. Why would we want to live like them? Paul stated at the outset that we have been delivered, or rescued, from this present evil age. Believers in Christ have been separated from this world and are already living in the age to come—the age of the Spirit. We are sons and daughters of the kingdom, heirs in Christ, and we share the nature of the Father through the Spirit. To live according to the flesh is to return to our former life as those who do not believe. To live according to the Spirit is to live in keeping with the values and norms of the coming age that was inaugurated by Christ through his death and resurrection. This truth is paramount, but this is what we continually forget.

It is easy to forget the source of our citizenship and allow the world to define us. It is easy to look to this world, through law and through the flesh, to satisfy our deep hunger for acceptance, love and approval. But Paul is saying that this world has nothing to offer. We don't belong there, so don't look there. It is a waste of time.

The sixth principle is this: The flesh has been crucified, and we must take up our cross daily. What must we do with this powerful force called the flesh? Paul says that it has been crucified with Christ. We must make sure it stays crucified. The verb tense indicates that this is something that we did decisively at the moment of our conversion. We “crucified” everything we knew to be wrong. We took our old self-centered nature, with all its sinful passions and desires, and nailed it to the cross. We must be assured in our minds of this past reality. And we must leave the flesh nailed to the cross. We are called daily to take up this cross and put to death the works of the flesh, to completely and utterly reject it whenever it rears its ugly head.

In order to accomplish this, we need to have an attitude towards the flesh that is consistent with the crucifixion. Let us consider crucifixion for a moment. This form of execution was reserved for the worst criminals. It was an ugly, painful, lingering manner of death. Once a criminal was crucified, death was certain to follow. Soldiers were placed at the scene to guard the victim and prevent anyone from taking him down from the cross until death was confirmed.

In the same way, crucifying our flesh is painful and unpleasant, but we must be harsh and ruthless, for this is godly homicide. We tend to be too kind and gentle with the flesh, because we don't like the sight of blood or the feel of the pain of death. We can keep wistfully returning to the scene of the execution once we have crucified our flesh. We begin to fondle it, to long for its release—to even try and take it down from the cross. We can revive the life of the fleshly desires. We are tempted to breath life back into it, to let it live.

Shortly after I married my wife, I noticed that my old clothes began to disappear from my wardrobe. Occasionally I'd find a piece of my clothing in the garbage, or I'd see a bag filled with my old clothes left out for Goodwill. Even though I might never want to wear a certain item of clothing again, even though it was ugly and out of fashion, I'd get mad at Liz for not asking me before she got rid of it. I'd hold up an old shirt that I'd rescued from the garbage and say, “I love that shirt. I had some good times in it.” I would even try to sneak some of those old things back into my wardrobe.

We act the same way with the flesh. Although it has been crucified, thrown out, and left to die, we keep dragging the stinking, rotten corpse out of the garbage. We say, “I don't want to get rid of that quite yet. I am too fond of it.” We need to learn to leave our ugly flesh crucified on the cross. We must put it to death on a daily basis. As Aldous Huxley said, “‘Our kingdom go’ is the necessary and unavoidable corollary of ‘Thy kingdom come’” (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 168).

All of these principles concerning the flesh declare that in Christ we have been set free to say no. Next week we will discuss the work of the Spirit, but we must begin by saying no to the flesh. We must say no to all the voices that seek to tempt and seduce us, the things we once were addicted to in our search for approval. We can say no to this world's acceptance. We can say no to our crucified flesh. We have been set free from this present evil age. We are sons and daughters in God's kingdom, the new age, the new humanity. Everything that we need has been given to us in Christ Jesus. Our part in this is to keep saying no to those things that would drag us back once more to the old order.

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