

Sunday June 19, 2022

## Lesson 3: Life Apart From the Spirit

Scripture: Galatians 5: 13-21

### **Context:**

Our focus on life in the Spirit continues with a jump to the book of Galatians. However, today's lesson examines what happens when life is lived apart from the Spirit. Today we will examine the consequences of living apart from the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

To a letter written to the Galatian Christians, Paul writes passionately of what life looks like in the Spirit. As there are questions around circumcision and who may belong to the body of Christ, Paul emphasizes the importance of justification by faith and dying and rising with Christ.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the letter, Paul calls the church to examine their roots and to remember their identity in Christ.

Paul emphasizes his point in chapters three through the first part of chapter five by revisiting the Torah. Paul explains how the Torah gives very clear instruction for ceremonial rites and for its role in community membership. Yet the full identity in God for Christians comes in union with Christ where their familial relations and experience of true freedom are secured.<sup>2</sup> This identity gives the Christians what they need to live with one another and ties back to the rich heritage already given unto them.

There is a freedom given to Christians in their identity and as a result there is also a call to responsibility. The dominant theme in the rest of chapter five focuses on this freedom and how it is tied to a command of love. Love is not another heavy load laid upon believers like a new law; rather love is the expression of true freedom.<sup>3</sup> Love as a fruit of the Spirit allows Christians the freedom to lean into who God has made them to be instead of ignoring or adding to the burdens of one's neighbors.

While we do not know all the challenges facing the Galatian Christians, we can deduct from the writings of how there were various camps of people ranging from those who wanted circumcision formally imposed to those who were libertines. Yet with such diversity comes the challenges. Thus, Paul warns these Christians about abusing their God-given freedom and destructive fighting among themselves.<sup>4</sup> They are to remember the law given unto them: love your neighbor as yourself. Yet in tongue and cheek, Paul warns them of it they choose not to do so, to watch the damage they do to themselves.

Instead, Paul calls them to be guided by the Spirit. The Spirit does not lead to actions where people antagonize one another either in ways of the flesh, or of doing things like fighting, hating, losing tempers, or engaging in group rivalry. If one's so-called "Spirit-led" activity ends

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<sup>1</sup> Cousar, Charles B. "Galatians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 121.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

in needless enmity, strife, jealous, and dissension, it's a safe bet the Spirit had nothing to do with it.<sup>5</sup> Those things are led by other spirits.

### **Application**

These upcoming two weeks many of us are preparing for some way to celebrate the fourth of July and our country's freedom. We will gather together for BBQs, perhaps attend a patriotic concert, and hopefully spend time with those we love in the land we love. We will reflect on our country's history, our growing edges as a nation, and hopefully remember those who gave their lives so that such freedom can be enjoyed. And once again we will focus on a word by which the American way of life has become so important: freedom.

I love freedom. I remember all the times I have felt in on an individual level. I will never forget opening a note from my father when I was dropped off at college with several maxims, one which emphasized how I now had the "freedom," to make choices and he prayed I would enjoy it and learn things along the way.

Because of the gift of freedom though, we often are given choices. We are free to do things like engage with our own desires and impulses. We are free to say what we want to others and in some places, do what we want. We are given an empty slate upon which we may write our stories.

Yet as Christians this freedom is tied to another gift; the gift of love which comes from the Spirit. God won't withhold God's love from us when we abuse the freedom we've been given. However, God does warn us when we tell the Spirit to go away because we are a "free" people to do what we want of the consequences which will come to haunt us and the generations which follow us.

Every age of the church has struggled with freedom. Even with our best intentions when it comes to accountability and standards, there are times we run the risk of abusing our freedom and ride not on the Holy Spirit, but our own spirits. The results always come out as sooner or later, there is hatred, fighting, obsession, group rivalry, conflict, jealousy, and other behavior where we act outwardly as people who do not resemble the Lord we say we follow. We may say we do those things for the sake of protecting God and yet the truth always comes out. There was something we wanted and the best way to get it was to use God's name and trample over anyone who got in our way.

If there is one law God emphasized with freedom, it was loving our neighbor as ourselves. This may sound simple on the outset and yet we continue to mess it up. We get our selfish desires focused on something and we will go on and on to justify why we want to do whatever it is we want to do. Even if the Spirit is not nudging us to do it, we still go on because we somehow believe we can put God in our image, and everything will work out.

I've found the Holy Spirit often convicts me when I am tempted to lean into the selfish nature I possess, which can be covered up with respectability or righteous anger. Just the other day I was going to send a response to someone with a bit of the sting, but I just couldn't press the send button. I had the freedom to send the response. I might even be able to justify the passive aggressive nature of the message. Yet something was holding me back.

So, I reached out to one of my holy friendships. I asked them what they thought and together we realized my actions were not in the name of the Holy Spirit; they were tied to my own ego and desire to be right. I was not loving my neighbor and I was not living life in the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 141.

Spirit.

Yet because of a holy friendship of someone who loves me and wants to be in kingdom ministry, there was the chance to live life in the Spirit. And that freedom is oh so more rewarding than a life focused on myself and just doing what “comes naturally.” The Holy Spirit wants to guide so we might be more loving with one another and experience the true freedom we have in Christ.

How have you seen the church struggle with life apart from the Holy Spirit? Do you see any of these behaviors in yourself; in groups with which you identify? How has the Holy Spirit convicted you of your words or actions not reflecting life in the Spirit? Why do you think God gives us the freedom to choose how we will live with one another? Who are the people who help you live life in the Spirit?

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