February 22/23, 2014

The Spirit at War with the Flesh

Free Indeed: A Study of the Epistle of Galatians

Galatians 5:13-25

Pastor Bryan Clark

Just let me ask you a question: Why does it seem like so many Christians and so many churches seem to be determined to embrace a very ordinary, average grace? Why do our critics say we talk way too much about grace? What is the fear? What is the concern of embracing a full, wondrous, amazing theology of grace? I would suggest to you the concern is this: If you talk too much about grace, it will lead to license. It will lead to people taking advantage of grace and living as they please. As long as you think that too much grace is going to result in people pursuing the desires of their flesh, you will never embrace anything more than an ordinary, average grace. But what if that concern is not valid? What if it's simply not true? What if it's actually the opposite? And by embracing an average, ordinary view of grace, you actually create an environment that causes people to pursue the desires of their flesh.

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Galatians, Chapter 5; we pick it up in verse 13 that sounds very much like verse 1 that we talked about last week. *"It was for freedom that Christ set you free."* And we reminded ourselves that freedom is not freedom from sin, that freedom is freedom from condemnation, freedom from the curse of the Law, freedom from wrath. It's freedom in Christ. Well, that's the theme he comes back to in verse 13. In verse 1 he's concerned they're drifting back into legalism. It's the same concern he has in verse 13.

> **For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh,** (*NASB, Galatians 5:13a)

Now those that would maintain that if you over-emphasize grace, it leads to license, would often cite this verse and say, "Ah ha, there it is." Paul has the exact same concern. If that's what you're understanding, then you understand the tension to be between license and legalism—license meaning you just do as you please and sin against God, and legalism.

Now I've told you before, I grew up and for many years thought that was the tension. So the tension is between license and legalism, and the Christian life is lived somewhere in the middle with the understanding that, if you're going err, at least err to the legalistic side. That was often the justification for legalism. This week I was reading a commentary by a very well known commentator—many of you would recognize the name—and that is exactly what he said. He said the tension in the Christian life is between license and legalism, and liberty is found somewhere in between. I would suggest if you believe that, you will never embrace anything more than ordinary, average grace. If you believe amazing grace turns people loose to pursue license, the risk is just too high to embrace such grace. But I would suggest to you that's simply not the case. As a matter of fact, the key in understanding what Paul is saying is: how are we going to define the word *flesh*?

Now first of all, some of your translations say "*sinful nature*". That's a very unfortunate translation. As a matter of fact, at that point it's not a translation, it's an interpretation. The word is *sarx*—that's the Greek word; its flesh. It's the same word that's been throughout the book of Galatians translated *flesh*. Some would say that the flesh and a sinful nature are one and the same, and many

of us would say it's not. We wish the translators would just translate and let the theologians argue over the meaning of the words. The word *flesh* here is the same word he's used throughout Galatians. So it would raise the question, "Why would we, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, change the definition of flesh to mean license?" He has used the term consistently a couple of times to refer to flesh and blood, but all of the other times he's referring to this propensity to be our own god and what I can accomplish apart from the Spirit of God. And I would make the case that in many of the texts in Galatians, he uses the word flesh and law almost interchangeably. That's the whole point is the flesh is determined to be its own god and, on the basis of that, I will make myself acceptable to God—which is legalism. So throughout the book that's been his concern.

Now I could show you lots of texts to make that case. Let me just show you two that we've previously covered. One is in chapter 3, verse 3. Chapter 3 is the same concern as chapter 5, that those who have truly believed on the basis of God's grace, are now drifting back into bondage, and in the process of that discussion, he says in verse 3*: Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

He's clearly not talking about license; he's talking about legalism. If you read on in the text, that's what he brings up. It's the Law. It's propensity to believe by keeping the Law, you make yourself righteous before God. And so he's saying you started on the basis of the Spirit, what would cause you to return to the flesh, i.e. legalism? Another text where it's very obvious is chapter 4. We looked at this two weeks ago. He's using Abraham and Sarah and Abraham and Hagar as an allegory to distinguish between that which is of grace and that which is of the flesh and He identified that if you are a people of grace, then Sarah is your mother. It's a miracle by the Spirit of God. If you are by law, then Hagar is your mother and it's according to the flesh. We see that clearly spelled out in verse 29: *But as at that time, he who was born according to the flesh, persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit.*

And he says in the allegory, people of grace are the people born of the Spirit; and people born according to the flesh are people of the law, the legalists. Now that's consistent throughout the book of Galatians, so that raises the question: why, when we get to chapter 5, would we suddenly redefine our terms? One of the basic principles of interpretation is you understand a text within its context and, if Paul has been consistently defining a term one way, then there's no reason to think he suddenly changes his definition.

Now if the legalist is reading verse 13, what he understands is too much grace turns into license and so by that, the legalist justifies his legalism. But he also looks at that verse and says, "That's not me. That's all those sinners; that's the problem." But if he rightly defines flesh as Paul has been defining it—the propensity toward legalism—then his concern is the legalist; that the legalist, because of an average, ordinary grace, is actually going to pursue the desires of the flesh, and the desires of the flesh are legalism. At the end of the day, what my flesh wants is to be God, to say, "I can do this myself. I can make myself righteous," is what my flesh wants to believe. And when my understanding of grace is very average and ordinary, part of what comes with that is, "I have to help," and my flesh says, "That's what I want." It's a manifestation of my desire to be God. The last part of the verse says:

> **...but through love serve one another.** (Vs. 13b)

...which is the alternative. One of the realities of a performance-based system is that the system requires you to be selfish. It just requires it; the very essence of the system is selfish. The very essence of legalism is constantly evaluating and assessing myself. The system requires me to be

self-focused and, "Am I keeping the rules? Am I measuring up? How do I compare with other people?" It's just a constant emphasis on *me*. That's what the system requires; therefore I never have the freedom to love others, to think of others as more important than myself. But when you understand the realities of grace and, on the basis of God's grace I now am acceptable to God because of what Christ has done *for* me, not my performance, I have been set free. I don't have to think about myself everyday. I don't have to assess myself everyday. I don't have to judge myself everyday. I don't have to compare myself everyday. I'm actually set free to think of others as more important than myself.

He actually uses a play on words. The word **serve** there is the Greek word for *slave*. Rather than being a slave to the Law, and the bondage of that, I become a slave to loving others, which is what God has called us to. Verse 14:

> **For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."**

Now the rabbis, Jesus, the Judaizers—they would have all understood this. It was very common to summarize the Law in that: *you love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself*. Jesus was actually asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" That was His answer, and sometimes they just shrank it down to *love your neighbor as yourself* as kind of the shorthand version of that. In essence what Paul is saying is the essence of the Law is to love your neighbor as yourself, and those that are so bent on keeping the Law need to understand, at the end of the day, they will never do that. They can never be set free to love their neighbor as themselves, whereas the people that have abandoned the Law as a means of righteousness and embraced grace, are radically, by the Spirit of God, changed from the inside out and, by the power of the Spirit, are actually released to love their neighbor as themselves. The whole thing turns over. Those who were bent on keeping the Law will never keep it. And those who were set free by the power of grace are those who will ultimately keep the law. That's in essence what he is saying.

Just one kind of a side comment: I do find it interesting that the text says, **Love your neighbor as yourself.** In one way I would suggest that the legalist does that, because most legalists hate themselves. They despise themselves. They despair about themselves. They are miserable. They constantly assess themselves up against the Law and they don't even come close to measuring up. And so they make their lives miserable but part of what flows out of that is, "I'm going to make my neighbor miserable. I not only despair of myself; I'm going to despair of you. I'm miserable; I'm going to make you miserable. If I can't be happy, I don't want you to be happy." In some sense they do love their neighbors as themselves, but it's miserable.

It's a very different system when you understand: on the basis of who I am in Christ, not on the basis of my performance, I've been radically changed. I'm justified. I'm righteous. I'm accepted by God. When I can start to view myself not through the lens of performance but through the lens of what Christ has done *for* me, it changes how I view myself. And when it changes how I view myself, it changes how I view others, and I really am able to fulfill, in the way God desires, that I love my neighbor as myself. Grace is the only way to do that.

> **But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.** (Vs. 15)

So again he's reminding us that legalism leads to conflict. Now he has raised this issue over and over in the book of Galatians. The very nature of the system creates conflict. Where there is legalism, there is conflict. Where there is legalism, there is a fight; there is a war. That's just the nature of the system.

Now I would say for me personally, I grew up in the fundamentalist movement and there are many godly people that I respect to this day who were in that movement. But I would also say there was a very high level of legalism and that was very unfortunate. For me, even as a high school student, one of the things that caused me to begin to think maybe this isn't exactly correct, was exactly this: there was just always conflict. Why is it that we are always mad? Why is there always conflict? Why is there always anger? Why is everything a fight? And yet when I would read the Bible, Jesus said the identifying mark of a Christ-follower is love. And it just seemed like something isn't lining up here; this isn't the way it's supposed to be. And for me it started to shake loose some things that maybe we needed to back up and rethink some things. Something doesn't seem to be working. Verse 16:

> **But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.**

Walk by the Spirit is a daily moment by moment, hour by hour choice to submit, to surrender in brokenness and humility to the power of the Spirit in me. The alternative is to cater to my flesh, and my flesh wants to be God. When he references **the desire of the flesh**, that's what he's saying. My flesh wants to be God. My flesh wants to be in charge. My flesh wants to believe somehow, someway, I can make myself more acceptable to God. There's a reason why religion is popular around the world. There's a reason why legalism is so common, because that's what my flesh wants. When I embrace an average, ordinary theology of grace, part of what must come with that, is, "I have to help. I have to perform to add to that," and my flesh says, "That's exactly what I want. I want to be God. I want to do this myself," and so that is the desire of my flesh.

The tension is not between license and legalism; the tension is between the Spirit and the flesh, and the flesh is my desire to be my own god and it will manifest itself in one of two ways: either in legalism or in license—and oftentimes people jump back and forth between the two. People that are up to their eyebrows in legalism; then they abandon that and they go full speed into license, and then at some point they abandon that and they go back to legalism. On one hand it looks like these huge swings; I would say it's not a swing at all. It's just going back and forth—two different ways to manifest the flesh. The problem is they are stuck at the flesh end of the scale, and the only way out of that is the life of the Spirit, which requires a full, wondrous, amazing theology of grace. He goes on then to describe this tension:

> **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.** (Vs. 17)

So clearly that's the battle between the Spirit within me and my desire to be my own god. It's Romans, chapter 7, where Paul says, "*The things that I want to do I don't do; the things I do, I don't want to do."* And then he ends up by saying, *"This is a miserable way to live, wretched man that I am.*" But then he asks the question, "*Who will set me free?"* Answer: Romans, chapter 8: "*The Spirit of Jesus will set you free*."

When he says that life in the Spirit means you cannot do as you please, what he is saying is the default mode of every person in the room is the flesh. That is my default mode. That's what I

want. I want to be my own god. I want to call my own shots. I want to be in charge of my own life. I want to believe somehow I can make myself more acceptable to God. That's my default mode. And unless you very intentionally decide it's going to be different than that, that's what your flesh desires. There is simply no one in this room that is so spiritual that every morning you wake up and say no to the flesh and live in the Spirit without consciously thinking about it. If you just get out of bed and roll with it, the default mode is *flesh*. "Today will be about me. It will be about me being in charge, me being God, me calling the shots." It's a conscious, broken, humble, submissive, surrendered decision every day to say, "Today will not be about me. Today will not be about my agenda. Today will not be about my selfishness. Today will be about the Spirit of God in me. It will be about what He wants. It will be about others. It will be about the life of the Spirit in me." It's a choice you make every single day. Verse 18:

> **But if you are led by the Spirit** (in other words if you live that way), **you are not under the Law.**

That's the freedom and the only way that freedom happens is if you understand how amazing grace is—that on the basis of grace, I have been set free. On my best days and on my worst days I pursue the life of the Spirit, and I'm acceptable, and I'm righteous, and I'm loved, and I'm forgiven, and it's the life of the Spirit in me that empowers me to live this way. Verse 19:

> **Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.** (Vs.19-21**)**

Now I don't think it's necessary to go through and try and define all those. They are fairly obvious, but he says **things like these**, so he's not making a checklist; he's just trying to make a point. So what is the point? If you take the view that the flesh is referring to license, then he's saying, "Here's the list." But I don't think that's the point he's making. The point he's making is this: if you choose law—legalism—which is what your flesh wants, then you're depending upon the flesh to make you righteous. But let's remember the flesh isn't righteous. And so his description there is saying the flesh is all messed up. The results of being your own god are things like these. There are sexual sins; there are religious sins; there are social sins, but the point he's making is your flesh just doesn't have the capacity to pull off the job. Your flesh is all messed up. And if that's true, why would you think your flesh could make you righteous?

When he says **those who practice such things**, the verb tense would be practice as a way of life, a habitual pattern in life. Certainly what he's *not* saying is if you commit any of those sins, you cannot inherit the kingdom of God; you're out because, frankly, every person in the room would be out, and that would be contrary to everything he said about grace. The point he *is* making is if you think your flesh can make you righteous, let's remember this is what the flesh does and people that depend on their flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God. But rather this will describe their habitual pattern of life; that's the point he's making. The alternative to that is verse 22:

> **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.** (Vs. 22-23)

Meaning **there is no law** that can produce this. There's no legalism that can produce this. It's a fruit of the Spirit. Now it's worth noting that they are the *works* of the flesh, the *deeds* of the flesh

contrasted with the *fruit* of the Spirit. One is what we accomplish in ourselves. One is what the Spirit of God accomplishes in us. One is a work. One is a fruit. Those are two very different things. It's also important to notice, it's not *fruits* of the Spirit. It's not plural. It's *fruit* of the Spirit—singular. When we interpret this as fruits of the Spirit, we kind of cherry-pick two or three. "Well, I think I do pretty good with this one, and this one, and this one. Really need to work on this one, and this one, and this one." I would suggest to you if that's your story, then you are still in the flesh. The fruit (singular) of the Spirit is saying if the Spirit is in charge, this is the fruit. This is the outflow of that. So he's saying this whole thing is the fruit; it's the outflow of submission and surrender to the Spirit. You can't be partially walking with the Spirit. Either you are or you aren't. And if you are, here is the fruit. He says, verse 24:

> **Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**

Past tense—you have done this. "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet Christ lives in me." That's Galatians 2. This is basically Romans 6. The very essence of what it means to accept God's salvation is: at some point in time you came to the conclusion, "I cannot save myself. It's not God in me. It's not a little bit of grace and a little bit of law. It's an understanding that I, in my own flesh, can never be good enough. I cannot save myself. I cannot make myself righteous." In order to reach out and experience God's salvation, at some point you concluded that. Therefore you said, "I need Christ," and on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross and His grace, you believe that is the basis for your salvation. When we talked about that in Romans 6, the text refers to the *old man* that believed somehow I could do it myself. The old man died. How dead is he? He's so dead we buried him. Dead and gone! But there's a new *me* that's raised with the resurrection of Jesus. It's the life of the Spirit. It's *new life* in me. So in essence what he is saying is you concluded the old way of thinking is dead, and you have embraced a new way of thinking. If that's true, why would you start drifting back to the old way of thinking? That's the concern.

> **If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.** (Vs. 25-26)

Verse 26 is back to the problems and the conflicts that flow out of legalism, flow out of the flesh and that's kind of a hinge into chapter 6. Verse 25 is the reminder, if you have been made alive by the Spirit (Romans chapter 6) and the tense is: if you have and we know that you have as a believer, if that's true, then **walk by the Spirit**. Why would you go back to the flesh and the flesh's desire is legalism. So if it's the Spirit that makes me alive, why wouldn't I understand that it is the Spirit that's going to give me what I need to live the life that God has called me to?

Walking in the Spirit is as practical as every day. It's a choice of my will in brokenness and humility, in submission and surrender to say, "God, today I'm not in charge. Today I'm not going to be my own god. I'm not going to try to make myself righteous or holy or accepted. I'm not going to pursue my agenda. This is not going to be my day to be God. But I choose, rather, to surrender, to submit, to understand what You want and Your call, and Your power in my life, and today will be about You and surrendering to You, as I go through the course of my day." It's a day by day, moment by moment decision that we make.

As long as I believe that too much grace leads to license, I will always embrace a very average, ordinary grace. And when I embrace an average, ordinary grace, it causes me to give in to the desires of my flesh, which is my desire to be God and make myself righteous. Legalism is highly appealing to the flesh.

We live in a world full of things like pluralism, which is the idea that all religions ultimately lead to God. And even the idea that you can have kind of a religious buffet—pick and choose, make your own religion—that's an outflow of my thinking I can be my own god. We have relativism which is the belief that I can decide for myself what's right and wrong. Nobody is going to tell me. I'm going to make that choice myself, which is an outflow of my belief that I'm God. But just as much it's legalism, which is an outflow of my belief that I can be God, and somehow, someway, through my performance I can merit God's favor; I can make myself *more* in the eyes of God.

But when I embrace this full, rigorous, wondrous, amazing theology of grace, I realize it's all Jesus. It's not based on my performance at all. On my best days and on my worst days, I am free. I am free of condemnation. I'm free of judgment. I'm free of wrath. I'm free to experience the life of the Spirit. It is only when I understand that, that I run to the *light room* and I'm loved and I'm accepted and my soul comes back to life. It's only in the light where there's true repentance and confession and realignment, and day after day I begin to live in the light of the power of the Spirit in me. It's only a full, rigorous theology of grace that gets you there, and that is the only way out of the bondage that comes with legalism and the flesh.

I've mentioned before in the preaching world we kind of have this three-tiered model. It starts with understanding. It moves to belief and then moves to application or the living. You will never really live out something you don't believe, and you can't really believe something you don't really understand. I can help you understand it, but I cannot believe it for you. At some point you have to decide what you believe to be true. Does amazing grace turn into license? Or does amazing grace open up the door to the life of the Spirit in order that we might live the life that God has called us to?

> *Our Father, we're thankful that grace truly is amazing. Lord, when we misunderstand the truth, we settle for something so much less than what You've offered. Lord, help us to under that grace is amazing and the more I understand that, embrace that, the more I embrace the life of the Spirit in me. It doesn't lead to license, it leads to submission and surrender and joy and the fruit of the Spirit. Lord, help us to believe this so much that we actually live like it. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Galatians 5:13-26
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Opening Discussion

1. So what is legalism? How can we discern what is and isn't legalism in our own lives and in the churches or organizations that we are in?

2. Is it possible to become legalistic about our "freedom?" In what way?

3. Which is the greater enemy of our freedom in Christ, legalism or license? Why?

Bible Study

1. Read Galatians 5:1-12 and review briefly what you learned in that text.

2. Compare 5:1 with 5:13. Notice the similarities (remember the word "serve" in 5:13 is the Greek word for slave).

   It seems Paul's statement regarding subjecting ourselves again to the yoke of slavery from verse 1 would help us define "opportunity for the flesh" in 5:13. What, then, does he mean by this statement in v. 13?

3. To simply define the flesh as "sinful nature" or something similar is to miss Paul's point as it relates to legalism. How has he defined the term "flesh" in Galatians so far? (1:16, 2:16, 3:3, 4:29)

   Paul is not going to suddenly change the meaning of his terms halfway through his letter. "Flesh" in Galatians refers to what?

   What is the symbolism as it relates to the flesh in circumcision?

4. Define the differences between someone who lives by the flesh (legalist) and someone who walks by the Spirit, according to 5:13-26. What is the difference between "deeds" in verse 18 and "fruit" in verse 22?

5. In 5:19-21 Paul is arguing that legalism is not only bondage but it's trusting the flesh to do something for us that it's incapable of doing. Compare Romans 7:14-25. What is the solution both from Galatians 5 and Romans 8?

6. What is true of every believer according to Galatians 5:24? Compare Galatians 2:20. Therefore what from Galatians 5:25?

Application

1. The issue in Galatians is an issue of a core belief. Can you (your flesh) make yourself righteous or must the Spirit of Christ make you righteous? One is something I merit by my good behavior; the other is one I simply receive by grace. For one, obedience is an attempt to make myself righteous; while for the other, obedience is an outflow of what the Spirit is doing in me.

   At the core of your being what do you really believe concerning who makes you righteous? Is it you in the power of your flesh or the Spirit on the basis of grace? If the Spirit's work is not on the basis of grace (undeserved) then you're right back to "meriting" the work of the Spirit which is back to law.

   If you do not believe you can make yourself righteous (the flesh) then all practices of legalism must be confessed as sin (5:7). Ask God to reveal the legalism in you and commit to doing what is necessary to rid it from your life.

2. If we are dependent on the Spirit of Christ to make us righteous, then our passion in life should be to pursue Him and learn what it means to walk by the Spirit. As a group, come up with 5 practical things you can do to learn and cultivate a Spirit-filled walk.

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