



Galatians - Chapter Five

III. Galatians 3:1-5:12 - Direct Appeals to the Galatians (continues/concludes)

III.e Galatians 4:21-5:1 - The Allegory of Hagar and Sarah (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Five

This letter has been building up to the amazing statement that opens this Chapter: 'For freedom Christ has set us free'. This declaration of freedom is both a statement of an accomplished fact and a goal to pursue. Freedom is available to all because of the accomplishment of Christ.

Paul reinforces the message of freedom with two warnings. The first is against a temptation to be yoked to the law that would only lead them back into slavery. The second to a misguided notion that their freedom allows them to do whatever they choose, rather than living their lives through the Holy Spirit. To misuse this freedom leads the believer into the same slavery found under the law that Paul had already warned of.

Paul concludes the chapter with a graphic contrast between the works of the flesh and its destructive tendencies, and the fruit of the Spirit that can be seen in those who are truly in Christ.

¹ For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1

This verse concluded the previous section and was commented on at the end of Chapter Four. However, it also heralds in the theme for the next section.

III.f Galatians 5:2-15 - The Nature of Christian Freedom

Paul makes a strong argument for religious freedom in this passage. It is not just about choosing his Gospel over that of his opponents but steering his readers to make a choice that brings them close to God. He instructs them of the folly of

pursuing righteousness through the law and warns against using their freedom for personal pursuits that do not glorify God.

III.f.i Galatians 5:2-12 - Judgment for those who turn from the Gospel

Those who turn to the law for salvation will cut themselves off from salvation. Hence Paul warns and encourages his readers not to defect.

² Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³ Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law.

Galatians 5:2-3

Listen! Once again I testify. Paul is personally emphasising his stand on this issue. The first requirement of the law for all male Jewish children and for converts to the Jewish religion is circumcision: <<*Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring*>> (Genesis 17:12), and: <<*On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised*>> (Leviticus 12:3). By submitting to this rite for the purpose of seeking reconciliation with God, one is in effect denying the completed work of Christ on the Cross.

I, Paul. This is one of only six occasions where Paul refers to himself by name in the body of a letter. The others are 2 Corinthians 10:1, Ephesians 3:1, Colossians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and Philemon 9. On each occasion it inevitably carries special significance.

The Galatians may have thought that requiring circumcision would not make much difference, but Paul knows that if they require obedience to any one part of the Mosaic law for justification, then they are committed to obeying all of it perfectly for their justification, something none of them could ever do: <<*For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.' Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'*>> (Galatians 3:10-11). Therefore he says if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you; that is, if they choose to trust in gaining God's blessings through the law, they will lose sight of what Jesus did for them at Calvary.

This is the first reference in the letter to indicate that some of the Galatians had already been circumcised but its syntax also alludes to the fact that the practice had only just begun, so it was not too late to warn the majority.

In the Greco-Roman world, circumcision was repugnant. Therefore, for a non-Jew to undergo this rite in order to be identified with the Jewish nation would be seen as an indication that the Cross was insufficient. Paul knew otherwise and this was one motivating factor for his stance against such a practice for the Gentiles who wanted to come to faith.

I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. The apostle confirms this statement: <<*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it*>> (James 2:10). This is like saying that Christ's sacrifice did not pay for all sins, and therefore a believer has to work out their own salvation by attempting to fulfil the law, the whole law. Paul would later confirm: <<*Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision*>> (Romans 2:25).

Evidently the Galatians thought that by observing a few important laws they could identify themselves as full members of the Jewish nation and thus secure God's blessing for themselves. Paul clearly informs them that the law is a vast, interdependent network of legal codes. Getting circumcised would indicate that they are relying on keeping the law for God to bless them. If they are relying on the law, then they are obligated to keep the whole law. They cannot be selective in which they choose to keep.

⁴ You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Galatians 5:4

Cut yourselves off from Christ, fallen away from grace. It seems that the false teachers had perhaps said that it was only necessary to be circumcised and to obey some of the law, e.g. a special diet, the religious festivals, etc. Paul is quite categorical concerning the outcome of such folly. The church is warned of the need to protect the individual from turning away from grace: <<*See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled*>> (Hebrews 12:15), and the individual receives a similar warning: <<*You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability*>> (2 Peter 3:17).

Paul is not discussing here the question of whether genuine believers can lose their salvation. He is only saying that people who may once have made a profession of faith, if they now are truly seeking to be justified by the law, did not really have a relationship with Christ and have fallen away from the grace that was offered and made available to them.

⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

Galatians 5:5

Through the Spirit indicates that evidence of the righteousness of God will not come through a minor operation of the flesh, i.e. circumcision, but through the life that a believer now lives because of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This is made even more explicit in vv.22-24.

By faith. Having painted a negative picture of what will happen if freedom in Christ is given up for the yoke of slavery, Paul describes in vv.5-6 how freedom in Christ is maintained. Both verses focus on faith. Faith in Christ is the only way to protect one's freedom in Christ. Paul spells out in very concise terms what this life

of faith is like. His terms echo what he has already taught at some length in the preceding chapters; they also introduce the central theme of the rest of the letter.

We eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness means that Christians do not attempt to produce perfect righteousness in their lives by their own efforts, as Paul's opponents were futilely trying to do, for their hope is not in themselves; instead, they wait for God to complete righteousness in them: <<***We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies***>> (Romans 8:22-23). This can be either when they die and are with the Lord: <<***But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect***>> (Hebrews 12:22-23); or at Christ's return: <<***Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven***>> (1 Corinthians 15:49), <<***Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is***>> (1 John 3:2), and: <<***But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life***>> (Revelation 21:27).

An alternative explanation is that the hope of righteousness refers to the believer's hope and expectation that God will declare that the believer is in fact going to be judged righteous at the final judgment: <<***Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life***>> (John 5:24); the longing for the time when God's vindication and justification of all his faithful people will be made manifest: <<***The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened***>> (Daniel 7:10c), the time of the new creation: <<***For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!***>> (Galatians 6.15).

⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Galatians 5:6

Paul is not opposed to circumcision in and of itself. His concern is for those who feel it is required for salvation: <<***Then certain individuals came down from Judæa and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'*** And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders>> (Acts 15:1-2). It is not, for salvation is by faith in Christ alone! In this life of faith what matters is union with Christ, not union with the Jews or Gentiles or any other racial or social group: <<***Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything***>> (1 Corinthians 7:19).

The evidence of true faith will be genuine love, for true faith in Christ is inevitably expressed through love: <<*You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works*>> (James 2:22). True faith is a living and active thing and produces love: <<*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*>> (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3).

⁷ You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?

Galatians 5:7

You were running well. Paul likes to compare the Christian life with athletics, for the Greek and Roman cultures both valued athletic prowess and the message would prove to be an apt analogy. One example was given to the Corinthians, who hosted the famous Isthmian Games: <<*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it*>> (1 Corinthians 9:24).

Who prevented you from obeying the truth? This is a rhetorical question for Paul knew that it was the leader or leaders of the opposition group that were insisting on the Galatians becoming circumcised and then following certain aspects of the law. Paul had posed the question earlier in the letter: <<*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!*>> (Galatians 3:1). However, Paul wants the Galatians to realise that it is still their choice who they listen to.

The false teachers are hindering the Christians from obeying the truth of the Gospel with all their talk about joining the Jewish people and keeping the law. Not that there is anything wrong with being Jewish, as Paul, the early disciples and even Jesus himself all were. However, all those who lead the church off at a tangent, away from the clear direction given by the central truth of the Gospel, are like these false teachers. They should be disqualified from ministry and even excluded from the churches in extreme cases: <<*When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord*>> (1 Corinthians 5:4b-5).

⁸ Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.

Galatians 5:8-9

The one who calls you is of course God through Christ: <<*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose*>> (Romans 8:28), <<*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel*>> (Galatians 1:6), and: <<*The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:24). It is not those confusing the Galatians or even Paul himself!

A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. Yeast was actually a rare commodity in the time and refers to leaven, a very small amount of dough that

would be taken from the previous week's batch and left to go mouldy in the sun. This would be added to a new batch of dough in order to create the chemical reaction that causes it to ferment and rise. Paul, like Jesus, uses this proverb to refer to the incorrect or false teaching that leads others away from the truth, for it tends to spread and grow out of all proportion: <<*Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod'*>> (Mark 8:14-15), and: <<*Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?*>> (1 Corinthians 5:6).

There are some who believe that such verses indicate that only unleavened bread should be used for communion. Although Jesus did of course use unleavened bread at the Last Supper, this was in accordance with the legal requirements of the Passover that he was celebrating at the time. This ordinance, along with the rest of the law, is no longer in force and people are free to celebrate the Lord's Supper in any way their hearts feel is appropriate.

When Paul had preached the Gospel, the Galatians heard the voice of God calling them through Paul. However, when the false teachers spoke, all that could be heard was flattery, boastfulness and empty rhetoric. They were skilful orators. No doubt they claimed to be giving God's message backed by Scripture; but all one could hear through their strident voices was a harsh repetition of the demands of the law.

¹⁰ I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.

Galatians 5:10

I am confident about you shows that Paul believes in the genuine faith of the Galatians and that it will win through once the error of their ways has been realised, which is the purpose of this letter, of course. The Galatians' confidence in God's grace has been badly shaken by the false teachers, who threaten them with the judgment of God if they do not keep his law. They are confused and discouraged. So Paul reassures the Galatians of his confidence in the Lord regarding them. Paul would also show similar confidence in the Corinthian church: <<*And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice; for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you*>> (2 Corinthians 2:3).

You will not think otherwise shows that Paul is calling them to be of one mind with him and the truth of the Gospel: <<*Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you*>> (Philippians 3:15).

That Paul is persuaded in the Lord probably means that, as he has wrestled with the question in prayer, he has arrived at a settled conviction that the Galatians will make up their minds in the right way.

Whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. It is not the Galatians who will bear the cost of their error providing they repent, it will be those who have led them astray, no matter what their motives were: <<*If any of you put a*

stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea>> (Matthew 18:6), and: <<Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness>> (James 3:1).

¹¹ But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed.

¹² I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

Galatians 5:11-12

Why am I still being persecuted. Paul was not being persecuted by the Jews wherever he went because he was still preaching circumcision but because he was clearly stating that it was no longer necessary and certainly had no meaning for the Gentiles who wanted to accept God's free gift of grace.

Both non-Christian and Christian Jews persecuted Paul for his dogmatic teaching that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised. It lay at the very heart of Judaism and would have brought into question the very existence of the Jewish nation if they were no longer seen as God's people alone. They were missing the point of what Paul was teaching - God's grace is for all: *<<for I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek>> (Romans 1:16). The Jews will always have a special place in God's heart: <<And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree>> (Romans 11:23-24). All Christians should remember that!*

If Paul were to be still preaching that people had to be circumcised, then the offence of the Cross would have been removed because pride in human effort would return. In other words, there would be no offence to humble a person by declaring that no work of theirs could make them righteous before God.

The offence of the Cross was seen as nonsensical barrier to those who did not believe: *<<but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles>> (1 Corinthians 1:23), especially so to the Jew who could not accept that their Messiah would be crucified, yet it was contained in the Scriptures, including Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14, which Peter quoted from: <<For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner', and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do>> (1 Peter 2:6-8).*

I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves! The metaphor may seem quite shocking that Paul is saying in essence that: 'those who would mutilate your flesh should go the whole way with themselves'. As a Pharisaic Jew Paul would have whole-heartedly believed in circumcision and indeed Jesus too was

circumcised: <<*After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb*>> (Luke 2:21). However, Jesus was a male child of Jewish descent and it was appropriate for him to be circumcised, dedicated at the temple as the first male child in his family and to undergo baptism in order: <<*to fulfil all righteousness*>> (Matthew 3:15b). For Gentiles under grace though, Paul sees circumcision as mutilation of the flesh, perhaps in the way of pagan worshippers, such as those who followed Baal: <<*Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them*>> (1 Kings 18:28).

Paul's language may seem strident to many but it should be remembered that false teaching and opposition to the Gospel must be met head-on and with determination, so as to minimise the impact that such activities can have on the Christian community or individual believers.

Here, Paul is probably referring to a barbaric ritual that actually took place in his day in Galatian pagan temples. The priests of Cybele, the mother goddess of the earth, castrated themselves with ritual pincers and placed their testicles in a box. Such a box is now on display in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England.

III.f.ii Galatians 5:13-15 - The law of love

Serving one another in love fulfils the law. Far from the Christian life being enslaving, it is the only way to resist the various slaveries offered by the world. However, this does not mean that Christians can do whatever they feel like doing, which itself is just another form of slavery. Rather, serving and loving others is the route to escaping bondage and fulfilling the ultimate purpose of the law. Christian freedom is a freedom to love God and his Creation.

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

Galatians 5:13

For you were called to freedom. This refers primarily in context to freedom from the Mosaic laws, as represented by circumcision in the debate. However, it is a fundamental truth that Christ offers freedom from the guilt and shame of the basic human condition that has prevented mankind from truly serving God. Human freedom is not the result of their decisions or actions. God acted in history on the Cross and through the resurrection to set them free. God acted in their hearts by his Spirit to set them free. The gracious initiative of God is underscored by Paul's repetition of the opening verse of this chapter. Both declarations of freedom also emphasise that freedom is the purpose of God's action in Christ. This is seen in his mission statement at the commencement of his earthly ministry: <<*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*>> (Luke 4:18-19).

An opportunity for self-indulgence or for the flesh means ‘an opportunity to follow your fallen, sinful desires and act contrary to God’s moral laws’. With Christian freedom there comes a choice: either to do what is right or to do as one wishes, irrespective of what the Gospel may teach. This is warned of elsewhere: <<***But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak***>> (1 Corinthians 8:9), and: <<***As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil***>> (1 Peter 2:16).

The word translated self-indulgence, sinful nature or flesh appears eight times between here and 6:10 to refer to that aspect of humanity that is opposed to the Spirit of God, the part which produces all that is evil and destructive in the human experience.

Given the pressures from the pagan world around them, one reason the Galatian Christians were attracted to the law may have been that they viewed the law as the only way to restrain and control the passions and desires of the flesh. They saw the law as a needed disciplinarian to keep them from being destroyed by their own sinful desires.

The law’s restraining power over sinful desires is a common subject in Jewish literature and must certainly have been a theme in the campaign of the false teachers who were trying to bring the Gentile Christians under the law. Paul has consistently argued that the Gospel message and a life led by the Spirit offers the freedom to choose to avoid the temptations of life.

Through love become slaves to one another is a call to copy Jesus’ own example of love for others: <<***He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’***>> (Mark 9:35), <<***For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many***>> (Mark 10:45), and: <<***This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you***>> (John 15:12). The alternative is to become a slave to one’s own selfish desires.

Paul was well aware of the human dilemma where someone under the law was more interested in keeping the law than serving others in their community. Their goal was to keep the law for their own merit. Even when they did serve others through the law then it was done through the desire to keep the law rather than to serve. Similarly, there are those who serve in churches today who do so because they want to serve for the prestige and recognition it affords them rather than because their heart is motivated by Jesus to do so.

¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Galatians 5:14-15

When Paul says the whole law is summed up in a single commandment to love your neighbour as yourself, and when he uses that command as the reason why the Galatians are to: <<***become slaves to one another***>> (v.13), he implies that Christians still have an obligation to follow the moral standards found in Scripture.

Obedience is not a means of justification, but it is still a crucial component of the Christian life. What is truly important here though is that faith in Christ is genuinely expressed through love for others.

This command comes originally from the Pentateuch: <<*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 19:18), but is quoted by Jesus in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31 and Luke 10:27), as one of two commands that sum up the whole law. Paul quotes it again in Romans 13:9 and the Lord's brother in James 2:8.

Paul describes the dangerous behaviour that was infecting and negatively affecting their fellowship. The words Paul uses are bite and devour. These disputes show anger, pride, unkind and untempered speech, and actions that can only ever be destructive. If continued, they would destroy one another. They must take care of this warning.

The Galatian readers of this letter wanted to be under the law as a way to attain spiritual perfection. However, their preoccupation with keeping the law did not lead them to achieving this. On the contrary, their bondage to the law produced a competitive, angry, judgmental spirit. Paul warns them of the results of their bondage to the law. This is the case even though Paul clearly stated: <<*So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good*>> (Romans 7:12). Freedom from the law is not license to break the law and pursue every selfish desire. No, freedom from bondage to the law is experienced by those who believe in Christ and are led by his Spirit. They use their freedom to serve one another in love.

IV Galatians 5:16-6:10 - Life in the Spirit and Love

Some interpreters believe Paul was fighting on two fronts: against the law teachers on one side and against the libertines on the other side. Therefore, the Galatian converts were being torn in two directions: by the message of the law teachers from the outside and by the libertine tendencies of their own Hellenistic culture.

According to this interpretation, Paul wrote 1:6–5:12 against the threat of legalism and he wrote 5:13–6:10 against the threat of libertinism. However, the NRSVA chooses to start the new major section from the subsequent paragraph of 5:16. Freedom from the law does not lead to libertinism, for believers by the power of the Spirit live a new life characterised by love.

However, it seems better to interpret this major section as a continuation of Paul's argument against the law teachers for two reasons:

1. Paul focuses on these law teachers immediately before (5:1-12) and after this section in 6:11-14.
2. This section constantly refers to the law so Paul is not aiming in a new direction. It is still a response to people who wanted to live under the yoke of the law. They were hoping to be able to overcome their moral problems by concentrating on keeping the law.

Paul seeks to convince them that the law has no power to restrain the flesh. On the contrary, those who try to overcome their sinful nature by observing the law

become more deeply enslaved to their sinful nature. Certainly Christian freedom from the law does not mean giving into the sinful nature; it means serving one another in love, and this is only possible by walking in the Spirit.

This is the essence of Paul's ethical appeal, which defines freedom as the freedom to love (5:13-15), freedom through the Spirit (5:16-18), freedom from evil (5:19-21), freedom for moral transformation (5:22-26), and freedom to fulfil responsibilities (6:1-10).

IV.a Galatians 5:16-26 - The desires of the flesh vs. the fruit of the Spirit

Life under the law expresses itself in the works of the flesh, but those who live by the Spirit bear fruit pleasing to God.

IV.a.i Galatians 5:16-21 - The Works of the Flesh

Paul claims that if the Galatians allow themselves to be circumcised then they will be living on a par with what he calls the works of the flesh, which Paul lists in detail in vv.19-21. Paul is not accusing his readers of actually partaking in such works. Instead, he indicates that, by allowing themselves to be drawn into the works of the law by succumbing to the rite of circumcision, then they are placing themselves on a par with the pagan world that is indulging in such activities.

¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Galatians 5:16

Having contrasted the flesh with love (vv.13-14), Paul now sets it against the Spirit. The only way to conquer the flesh is to yield to the Spirit, for Paul sees the two as being in opposition to each other. Live by the Spirit implies both direction and empowerment; that is, making decisions and choices according to the Holy Spirit's guidance, and acting with the power that the Spirit supplies: <<*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death*>> (Romans 8:2).

The Galatians probably felt that observance of the law was the way of life that would establish their identity and guide their behaviour as the new people of God. By turning to observance of law as their way of life, however, they were denying the Spirit's sufficiency to identify them as God's people and to direct their conduct. The Spirit is the best guarantee of Christian identity and the only sure guide for Christian behaviour. The Spirit is the only source of power to love in a way that fulfils the whole law.

The desires of the flesh would mean not just bodily cravings but all of the ordinary desires of fallen human nature; see the examples in vv.19-21. Paul's use of a double negative in the Greek could be expressed in English by saying, 'You will absolutely not gratify the desires of your sinful nature'. The fulfilment of this promise depends on the implementation of the command.

¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

Galatians 5:17

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit is a description of the ongoing daily battle that faces all people; in fact, Paul's original language describes it as a war. The pull of fleshly desire is so strong that, even though a person may know of, and desire to do, the best things of the Spirit, one is often unable to perform them: <<*For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin*>> (Romans 7:22-25). Such is human weakness.

To prevent you from doing what you want. Paul acknowledges that the Christian life is a struggle – a war between the flesh and the Spirit, as described in Ephesians 6:10-18. Yet his tone is not defeatist or implying that human failure is inevitable. He is saying that the believer can prevail against temptation.

This inner spiritual warfare is the nature of the Christian life; it is the experience of all those who *live by the Spirit*. The conflict Paul is describing here is not the moral conflict that everyone feels at some time, nor the conflict of a wayward Christian who is no longer committed to Christ. This is the conflict of a thoroughly committed Christian who is choosing each day to *walk by the Spirit*. Each day the Christian who chooses to walk by the Spirit is engaged in a fierce battle between the Spirit and the sinful nature. It is important to stress this point, because many Christians feel ashamed to admit that they are experiencing such a conflict. They feel that mature Christians should somehow be above this kind of struggle. They imagine that the great saints were surely too spiritual to feel the desires of the flesh. Paul flatly contradicts such images of super-spirituality.

¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

Galatians 5:18

Led by the Spirit. The verb, Greek *agō*, implies an active, personal involvement by the Holy Spirit in guiding Christians, and the present tense, better translated as 'if you are being led', indicates his ongoing activity. In v.16 Paul stated: <<*Live by the Spirit*>>, which requires active determination on the part of the believer. Now Paul speaks of life in the Spirit as passive submission by the believer. Both are complimentary rather than contradictory. Positive acceptance by the believer leads to positive action by the Spirit. When conduct is guided and empowered by the Spirit then love flows and God's law is fulfilled.

You are not subject to the law. The Spirit's active presence in believers' lives shows that they are no longer under the pre-Christian system: <<*The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?*>> (Galatians 3:2), <<*And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*>> (Galatians 4:6).

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,

Galatians 5:19

The works of the flesh means actions flowing out of fallen human nature and its desires. Apart from the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, these are the actions toward which sinful humans instinctively gravitate. The law forbade such actions as Paul lists in these verses but was powerless to prevent them. Only guidance from the Holy Spirit will keep a person from such transgressions. Paul says they are obvious, yet good people still have a tendency towards some of them at least! And no one needs to live under the guidance of the law to know whether they are living according to the flesh or according to the Spirit.

Fornication, impurity, licentiousness. The list starts with sexual sin, a subject that appears frequently throughout the bible. This is not because it is a sin greater than most others. It is one that is prevalent in human history and always has destructive consequences for the people involved. Therefore, Paul writes: <<***Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself***>> (1 Corinthians 6:18). Other than this, the list of vices shows little discernible order. One scholar wrote: ‘the seemingly chaotic arrangement of these terms is reflective of the chaotic nature of evil’.

The list of vices can be broken down into four major categories: illicit sex, religious heresy, social conflict, and drunkenness.

²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,

Galatians 5:20

Idolatry, sorcery. These are evidence of a desire to be in touch with the spiritual realm through humanly invented means: they supposedly have God as their ultimate object, but they reject the revealed way in which he should be worshiped. Because Christ is: <<***the way, and the truth, and the life***>> (John 14:6b), all other ways to God are false.

Enmity, strife, etc. When people reject God, they turn in on themselves, and so relationships between human beings are destroyed as well.

²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:21

Envy comes about when people are not content with what God has given them, longing instead for what he has given others. It was a theme fundamental in Scripture to warn people of its dangers: <<***You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour***>> (Exodus 20:17), <<***As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it***>> (Joshua 6:18), and: <<***The wicked covet the proceeds of wickedness, but the root of the righteous bears fruit***>> (Proverbs 12:12).

Drunkenness and carousing are examples of how people misuse God's good gifts in destructive and sinful ways, in rebellion against God as the gracious giver of all good things. In the OT, wine was associated with joy and celebration: <<**Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'**>> (Nehemiah 8:10), and: <<**You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart**>> (Psalm 104:14-15), but when abused was seen as being highly destructive: <<**Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent**>> (Genesis 9:20-21), and: <<**Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise**>> (Proverbs 20:1), and drunkenness is consistently condemned throughout Scripture: <<**Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit**>> (Ephesians 5:18).

Things like these. As comprehensive as Paul's list of vices is, it is by no means exhaustive. He could probably have carried on for a few more chapters!

Those who do such things. The present participle, Greek *prassontes*, translated here as do, refers to those who 'make a practice of doing' such things, as a pattern of life. Their outward conduct indicates their inward spiritual status: that they are not born of God, do not have the Holy Spirit within, and are not God's true children.

Will not inherit the Kingdom of God. This is an inheritance promised in both this life and the one to come. Jesus gives an indication of who will inherit the Kingdom in the beatitudes, including: <<**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**>> (Matthew 5:3), and: <<**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**>> (Matthew 5:10). Paul gives further guidance as to who will not: <<**Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God**>> (1 Corinthians 6:9-10), <<**What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable**>> (1 Corinthians 15:50), and: <<**Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God**>> (Ephesians 5:5).

Bishop Tom Wright concludes: 'Life is a battlefield, with flesh and spirit opposing one another, and you can never be totally off guard. What matters, though, is that your identity is that of a true child of God, indwelt by the spirit, without needing the Jewish law, and particularly its requirement of circumcision, as your badge of membership. If you're free of that, the spirit's motivation and power mean that you will also remain free from the snares of paganism, and the behaviour that goes with it. Free from the law, free from paganism, one is then free for God, and free to love one's neighbour. And, as the following verses will set out, one is free to be led by the spirit into a new way of life'.

IV.a.ii Galatians 5:22-26 - The Fruit of the Spirit

Those who choose instead to live by the Spirit (v.16) will bear the fruit of righteousness through their everyday lives; fruit that will last: *<<You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits>>* (Matthew 7:16-20), and: *<<You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name>>* (John 15:16). However, he did indicate that such fruitfulness may not always be seen immediately: *<<Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down">>* (Luke 13:6-9).

The underlying point is that, if believers live in the way the Spirit directs them to, the Jewish law will have no condemnation for them (v.23b), and there will be no need for the disruptive effects, setting one church member against another, which the false teaching has brought about (v.26).

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Galatians 5:22-23

The Spirit fights against sin not merely in defence but also in attack by producing in Christians the positive attributes of godly character, all of which are evident in Jesus in the Gospels.

It can be rightly argued that there are a lot of good people in the world who display many of these characteristics without knowing Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, and that is right for all are created in the image of God. However, those who do come to Jesus receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and can allow him to manifest all these qualities in everything they do. It is a change of heart motivation driven and directed by the Spirit according to the will of God.

Love appears first because it is the greatest quality in that it most clearly reflects the character of God: *<<For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love>>* (2 Peter 1:5-7), *<<Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love>>* (1 John 4:8), and: *<<But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another>>* (2 John 5). Refer also to 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

Joy comes in at a close second, for in rejoicing in God's salvation, Christians show that their affections are rightly placed in God's will and his purpose: *<<I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete>>* (John 15:11), *<<May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit>>* (Romans 15:13), *<<Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy>>* (1 Peter 1:8), *<<I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth>>* (3 John 4), and: *<<To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy>>* (Jude 24 NIV).

Peace is the product of God having reconciled sinners to himself, so that they are no longer his enemies, which should result in confidence and freedom in approaching God: *<<Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God>>* (Romans 5:1-2), and: *<<Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need>>* (Hebrews 4:16).

Patience shows that Christians are following God's plan and timetable rather than their own, and that they have abandoned their own ideas about how the world should work.

Kindness means showing goodness, generosity, and sympathy toward others, which likewise is an attribute of God: *<<Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?>>* (Romans 2:4).

Generosity means working for the benefit of others, not oneself; Paul mentions it again in Galatians 6:10: *<<So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith>>*.

Faithfulness is another divine characteristic; it means consistently doing what one says one will do: *<<God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord>>* (1 Corinthians 1:9).

Gentleness is a quality Jesus attributes to himself: *<<Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls>>* (Matthew 11:29); it enables people to find rest in him and to encourage and strengthen others.

Self-control is the discipline given by the Holy Spirit that allows Christians to resist the power of the flesh (v.17).

There is no law against such things, and therefore those who manifest such fruit are fulfilling the law – more than those who insist on Jewish ceremonies, and likewise more than those who follow the works of the flesh surveyed in vv.19-21.

²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:24

Again, **Christ** and the Spirit (v.25) come together as the source of the believer's life. Christians have **crucified the flesh**, or died with Christ to sin: <<*Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin*>> (Romans 6:4-6), and: <<*May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*>> (Galatians 6:14). Now that the old order of things has passed away for believers, their old sinful selves that belonged to that order have crumbled as well; so they should pay no attention to them. **Flesh** here should not be understood to mean physical bodies but rather fallen, sinful human nature with all its desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Galatians 5:25

Let us also be guided by the Spirit uses a different verb to that in v.16, meaning 'walk in line behind a leader', Greek *stoicheō*. There is no need to turn to the law for moral guidance - the Spirit is the only guide that is required in order to fulfil all of God's moral laws. One of the great prophecies about Jesus came through one directed by the Spirit: <<*Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'*>> (Luke 2:27-32).

²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:26

Let us not become conceited. Paul is probably referring specifically to attitudes that seem to have become a problem in the Galatian churches, see v.15. But these sinful attitudes and actions obviously extend beyond one Roman province: Paul has just mentioned enmity, strife, jealousy, and envy as 'works of the flesh' in general (vv.19-21).