

Galatians for You

1. *The Uniqueness of the Gospel (Galatians 1:1-9)*

The most striking aspect of the opening of Galatians is Paul's tone and the frame of mind behind it: "I am astonished..." (Gal. 1:6) What made Paul so emotional?

1. **Desertion of the Gospel**

First, Paul is astonished because these young Christians are taking hold of a gospel that is "no gospel" (v. 7).

Second, Paul is angry with the people who are misleading the young Christians – they are making trouble and want to distort the gospel of Christ (v. 7). Specifically, they are teaching that Christians must be circumcised and observe the Mosaic Law. But Paul says: *This is an absolute repudiation of all I have been telling you.*

2. **Paul's right to speak**

Who is Paul that he can speak this way?

He is an apostle (v. 1) commissioned directly by the risen Lord Jesus (Acts 9:1-19). This means that he had divine authority.

He is one sent with a particular message: the gospel (vv. 8-9).

3. **What is the Gospel?**

Who we are: helpless and lost. According to v. 4 we need to be delivered.

What Jesus did: he rescued us by giving himself for our sins.

What the Father did: he accepted the work of Christ on our behalf by raising him from the dead (v. 1) and by giving us the grace and peace (v. 3) that Christ purchased for us.

What moved God to do it: all because of grace. "according to the will of our God and Father" (v. 4); he "called [us] in the grace of Christ" (v. 6).

Why God did it: for his own glory (v. 5). Salvation, from first to last, is God's doing: his calling; his plan; his action; his work; and he deserves all the glory, for all time.

We love to manufacture messages of self-salvation because these give us the glory. But the gospel says: *You are in such a hopeless position that you need a rescue that has nothing to do with you at all. Moreover, God in Jesus provides a rescue which gives you far more than any false salvation you may want to chase.*

4. Gospel revision = Gospel reversal

Paul's warning is that any revision of the gospel message results in a reversal of the gospel message. A changed gospel is "no gospel at all" (v. 7). You cannot have "Christ plus something else."

"There is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ you must build your confidence on your own work" (Martin Luther).

5. Losing the Gospel today

The gospel has two non-negotiable poles:

- we are too sinful to contribute to our own salvation;
- we are saved by Jesus' work – the "grace of Christ" – plus nothing else.

This message is often perverted in one of four ways:

- Some churches teach that we are saved by "surrender" to Christ. A lot of emphasis is placed on strength of faith and feelings. But we are not saved "by great faith in a Saviour but by faith a great Saviour."
- Some churches teach that we are saved by faith plus orthodox beliefs and practice, e.g. exclusive psalmody and adherence to historic covenants.
- Some churches teach that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are a loving and good person. But this then excludes "bad" people from salvation. It also takes all the glory from God and gives it to men.
- Some churches are intolerant of small differences in dress and custom.

6. Is our Gospel the true Gospel?

Paul gives us a plumb line for judging all truth claims: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (v. 8).

The gospel as revealed in the Bible is the final authority. The Bible judges the church; the church does not judge the Bible. The Bible is the foundation for and creator of the church; the church is not the foundation for or creator of the Bible.

7. Why it matters

We must be clear and uncompromising about the gospel, because:

- a different gospel means you are deserting Christ who called you (v. 6);
- a different gospel is really "no gospel at all" (vv. 6-7);
- a different gospel brings fear, anxiety, guilt and condemnation (vv. 8-9).

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2. God's Amazing Grace (Galatians 1:10-24)

Galatians 1:10-2:21 is an autobiographical section of the letter – Paul's account of his conversion and early Christian experience. He uses his testimony to refute the claims of the people who are undermining the gospel – and he does this by showing that it all points at the amazing grace of God.

1. Counter Claims

Paul is defending himself from three attacks:

- He refutes the claim that the gospel he proclaimed was just the result of his own reflection and reasoning. In fact, his reasoning was going in the opposite direction (vv. 13-14). Instead, he received the gospel by a revelation of Jesus Christ (v. 12) – he actually met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.
- He rejects the claim that the gospel he proclaimed was derived from the leaders of the Jerusalem church (vv. 16-19).
- He implies that what he taught was 100% consistent with what the other apostles were preaching (vv. 18-24). He further asserts this in 2:1-10.

2. Amazing Grace: Who Paul Was

Paul had done many terrible things (v. 13). He had persecuted the church of God, to the point that Jesus asked him, "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 26:14).

Paul had done many religious things (v. 14). And as a result he knew that no one can be right with God on the basis of "good living."

The gospel is not "religion in general." The gospel is GRACE, the unmerited kindness of God towards people who deserve death. And as grace, the gospel calls us away from "religion" as well as irreligion.

3. Amazing Grace: What God was Doing

Paul looks back over his life and he sees that God's amazing grace was at work in his life long before his conversion. When Paul says God "set me apart from birth" (v. 15) he means that the grace of God had been shaping and preparing him all his life for the things God was going to call him to do – even though Paul had been resisting God and doing much wrong.

The gospel gives us new eyes by which we can review our lives and see God preparing and shaping us – even through our sins and failures – to become vessels of his grace to display his glory to the world.

Why? Because God loves us. And why does God love us? Because he loves us. God does not love us because we are serviceable. God loves us because he loves us because he loves us: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:7-8).

4. Amazing Grace: What God is Doing

Grace does not stop at conversion. Paul goes on to show what a life lived under God's grace looks like.

- First, God "was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (v. 16). A Christian has a personal relationship with Christ as well as an intellectual belief in Christ.
- Secondly, Paul took time to reflect and grow (vv. 17-18) – grace was an effective force in his life. It is probable that he spent his time in Arabia (Nabatea, an area SE of Damascus) reflecting and evangelising. It was on a return visit to Damascus that his life was threatened by the Jews with the consent of king Aretas (Acts 9:23; 2 Cor. 11:32).

5. Amazing Grace: How it Changes Us

Paul opens this section of Galatians by asking, "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man?" (v. 10).

The gospel sets us free from the fear of men. The fear of men is a slavish desire for their approval and good opinion, and dread of their censure. "The fear of man lays a snare" (Prov. 29:25).

The fear of God is not a slavish fear – it awe and wonder and attraction to his greatness; it is dependence on his provision.

We do not live God's way in order to become his children, but out of gratitude that are by grace already God's children.

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3. Gospel Unity (Galatians 2:1-10)

The Jerusalem Council described in this passage and reported in Acts 15:1-21 was an event of immense importance to us. At stake was the true nature of the gospel and the unity of the church built on that gospel.

1. Paul's Fear: Why he went to Jerusalem

Fourteen years after his first visit to Jerusalem Paul went again accompanied by Barnabas and Titus. He says that he “went up because of a revelation” and “in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain” (v. 2). Why the caution? Not because he was concerned that the gospel he proclaimed was wrong, but because the fruitfulness of his gospel mission was threatened. If the other apostles did not confirm his message and renounce the false teachers, it would be very hard for Paul to retain his converts.

Paul may also have been anxious that the Jerusalem church might not prove true to the gospel.

2. The Stakes: True Church Unity

At stake was the unity of the church. If the Jerusalem church tolerated those who were teaching the Gentiles must become Jews to be genuine Christians, this would have split the church in two.

“It was one thing for the Jerusalem leaders to give their approval to the conversion of the Gentiles, but could they approve of...commitment to the Messiah without inclusion in Judaism? Was their vision big enough to see the gospel of Christ not as a reform movement within Judaism but as good news for the world, and the church of Christ...as the international family of God” (John Stott).

3. The Verdict: Welcome

It is significant that Paul says that he “took Titus along” (v. 1). He took Titus as an example of an uncircumcised Gentile convert. Titus was to act as a concrete test case. Would the circumcised Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church accept Titus as a brother in the faith as he was or would they demand his circumcision first?

As it was “even Titus...was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek” (v. 3). The Jerusalem leaders added nothing to the message proclaimed by Paul (v. 6). This has fundamental implications for our understanding of the gospel. Circumcision had become symbolic of all the cleanliness regulations in the laws of Moses. But *in Christ* people become spiritually clean and acceptable to God. Therefore they are to be received as clean by other members of the church.

4. The Outcome: True Freedom

In v. 4 Paul says that only the Biblical gospel brings freedom; the message of “Christ-plus-anything” leads to slavery.

Gospel freedom is freedom from the law as a means of salvation. The gospel grants this freedom because it proclaims that our actual guilt in the sight of God has been removed through the forgiveness of our sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. This gospel freedom then produces two other freedoms:

- Freedom from man-made regulations. Since the moral code revealed in the Bible (love God with all your heart, soul and strength; love your neighbour as yourself) is too difficult, we substitute easier regulations (don't kick a football on Sunday; don't drink alcohol; etc.).
- Freedom from the treadmill of guilt and insecurity. It is not possible to build a relationship with God on the basis of keeping a moral code. If you try to do this, your repeated failures will hobble you with fear and anxiety.

In contrast to the slavery of man-made regulations, gospel freedom sets us free to walk in God's moral law.

In contrast to the slavery of trying to please God, gospel freedom motivates us with gratitude for grace.

5. Three Marks of Unity

The decision of the Jerusalem Council was essential for the unity (Jew and Gentile) of the church. This means:

- Accepting everyone who is “in Christ Jesus” (v. 4) regardless of cultural and ethnic background.
- Recognising that we have different callings (v. 7).
- Exercising practical care for those in need in the church (v. 10).

6. The Limits of Unity

There are two errors to be avoided: showing little regard for Christian unity by emphasising distinctives; or emphasising unity at the expense of the gospel.

By including Paul, Barnabas and the uncircumcised Titus, the Jerusalem apostles were excluding the teachers of the false “Christ-plus-something-else” gospel. By establishing gospel unity, they were also setting the boundaries of that unity – and the “false brothers” were outside it.

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8. *Two Religions, Two Ministries (Galatians 4:8-20)*

This passage sets out two contrasts: one between gospel faith and worldly religion (vv. 8-11) and the other between gospel ministry and worldly ministry (vv. 12-20). In this study we will focus our attention on the former of these contrasts.

1. The Idolatry of Biblical Religion

A careless reading of vv. 8-11 would suggest that Paul is warning the Galatian believers against slipping back into pagan idolatry. The “formerly” of verse 8 (“*Formerly*, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.) is matched by the “again” of verse 9 (“How can you turn back *again* to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?”).

BUT the whole point of Galatians is to warn against adopting a *biblical legalism*: the Judaizing teachers were urging the Galatian believers to be circumcised and to adopt the whole of the Old Testament law.

So, astonishingly, what Paul is saying is that trying to earn your salvation through scrupulous biblical morality and religion is just as much a form of enslavement to idols as outright paganism and its immoral practices! The religious person is as lost and as enslaved as the irreligious person.

“The worthless elementary principles of the world” – this phrase refers to the pagan notion that gods lay behind the basic elements of the physical world (fire, water, air and earth). Paul uses this expression to refer to whatever “idol” people worship as their lord and saviour – whether biblical legalism or pagan idolatry.

Without the gospel we will be under the slavery of an idol. That idol can be very subtle: career; morality; religious practice; family; service in the church.

Example: the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). Both the religious older brother and the irreligious younger brother wanted control of the father’s wealth. But neither wanted the father; both were alienated from him. At the end of the story it is the younger, immoral son who repents and goes into the father’s house, while the older, moral son stays outside in anger.

This is why Paul is “in fear” for the Galatians. They were observing “days and months and seasons and years” – the festivals and ceremonies of the Old Testament, And this new slavery to “non-gods” would be worse than the old. They would not know that they were far from the Father.

2. The Assurance of Being Known

In v. 9 Paul points the Galatians back to a right relationship with God the Father. Paul wants to secure them in, rather than alienate them from, the true gospel. The basis of their relationship with God is God's love for them: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God..." (v. 9).

It's not so much my love and regard for God, but rather his regard and love of me, that really makes me a Christian. Remember that in the Bible, to know someone is not first and foremost to have intellectual knowledge about them, but to have a close relationship with them. That I am "known by God" is equivalent to saying that "God loves me and is committed to me".

Why is this an antidote to idolatry? I can manipulate my idol to suit my needs. So idolatry is about me trying to deal with my insecurities, especially my lack of assurance of salvation. But if I am "known by God", then I am already absolutely secure – God's love and commitment are never in doubt.

"Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons, much less secure than non-Christians, because of the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy [and] jealousy and other...sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity." (Richard Lovelace)

Paul exemplified the security of being known by God. "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor. 4:3-4). It's as though Paul said, "Since God knows me, and sees Christ when he looks at me, I don't care what you think about me, and I don't even care what I think."

The great and central basis of Christian assurance is not how much our hearts are set on God, but how unshakably his heart is set on us.

If we begin to grasp that we are "known by God", we won't seek to bolster our self-image or standing before him through our works. We won't worship any idol – we will love Him, the One who knows us. How do I "grasp" this? By faith. Remember what we learned on the Lord's Day: "Faith is the faculty to perceive the love of God in Jesus Christ and make it the chief reality in my life." Every day, Hudson Taylor read the following:

*Lord Jesus, make thyself to me
a living bright reality,
More present to faith's vision keen
than any outward objects seen;
More dear, more intimately nigh
than e'en the sweetest earthy tie.*

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9. Grace to the Barren (Galatians 4:21-31)

In this section Paul continues to demonstrate that trying to be justified by works is incompatible with the true gospel. Rule-keeping religion is for the noble, the able, the moral, the strong – but it leads only to slavery, not to freedom. The gospel, however, is for disappointed failures – and it leads to freedom and fruitfulness.

1. Four Types of People

Paul addresses “you who want to be under the law.” Being “under the law” does not mean “obeying the law;” it means “relying on law-keeping for your right standing with God.” This suggests that there are four positions we might adopt:

(a) Law-obeying and law-relying People who adopt this position may be externally very sure of themselves, smug, self-righteous and superior; but internally they will also be insecure because they cannot be sure that they have done enough. This makes them touchy and sensitive to criticism.

(b) Law-disobeying and law-relying These people have a religious conscience of works-righteousness, but they are not living up to the standard. This may manifest itself as greater humility when compared to those of position (a), but this is really just a result of being guilt-ridden and having low spiritual self-esteem.

(c) Law-disobeying and not law-relying These people have no interest in the law of God, though their conscience may well still be informed by the basic image of God which they bear (Rom. 1:18-20). Theirs is a strong liberal self-righteousness.

(d) Law-obeying and not law-relying This is the Gospel position. Christians obey the law out of grateful joy that comes from the knowledge of their adoption, and out of the freedom of knowing that their sins are forgiven. They are more sympathetic than (a), more confident than (b), more tolerant than (c).

2. Law-Reliance Appeals to Natural Attributes and Abilities

Paul asks people who aspire to law-reliance, “Do you not listen to the law?” He is going to show that the very law by which the false teachers sought freedom actually spoke of their bondage.

So what does the law say? Paul takes us back to the first book of the Law – the book of Genesis and the story of Abraham and the promised child. Paul treats the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and their children, allegorically.

Abraham and Sarah decided to try and “achieve” the fulfilment of God’s promise through natural aptitude. Sarah was barren and past the age of childbearing. But Hagar, her slave girl, was young and fertile; and Sarah suggested (in keeping with the morals of the day) that Abraham sire a child by Hagar.

Abraham took the natural course of action. He relied on his ability and Hagar's fertility. And together they conceived a child, Ishmael. But there were two problems: (a) Abraham's action showed that he had forgotten God's promise and supernatural action in history; and (b) Ishmael was not the promised child through whom blessing would come to the nations.

Law-reliance appeals to our natural attributes (e.g. upbringing and character) and abilities (e.g. temper and education). But the result of law-reliance is not freedom, but more slavery: "Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children" (v. 25).

3. The Gospel is for Disappointed Failures

If salvation is by works, then only the "fertile" (the morally able and strong, the people from good families, the people with successful track records in school or at work) can have "children" (enjoy the approval and blessing of God and transform the lives of others).

But...salvation is not by works, and the gospel is not for people who rely on their own "fertility". The gospel is for people in their natural barrenness. Sarah was doubly incapable of children – she had been barren as a young woman, and now was past the age of childbearing. In a culture in which children were every woman's reason for being, Sarah was the disappointed failure. But the Bible says, "Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married" (Isa. 54:1).

The gospel offers joy and fulfilment, but only to the barren and the desolate; and these blessings cannot be earned.

4. The Gospel and Law Reliance Don't Mix

In the final paragraph Paul twice addresses the Galatians as brothers – he has something important to say, and he wants them to take it well!

Paul's point here is that you cannot mix the gospel and reliance on rule-keeping. He makes this point twice:

(a) Ishmael (the natural child who represents slavery to law-reliance) "persecuted" Isaac (the promised child who represents gospel freedom). In a similar fashion, religious people whose hope is pinned on their rule keeping will be critical of the freedom exercised by Christians.

(b) God told Abraham to "cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman" (v. 30). So Christians are to expel all law-reliance from their thinking, and rest wholly on the promise of God in the gospel.

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10. Gospel Freedom (Galatians 5:1-15)

At first sight the gospel seems to remove all incentive to holy live a holy life. Too many churches have responded to this by trading gospel freedom for a message which aims to stop people living “any way I want”. In this passage Paul shows that gospel freedom from fear and condemnation leads us to obey God, not to please ourselves.

1. Don't Lose Your Gospel Freedom, vv. 1-12

(a) Set Free for Freedom

Verse 1a is a key: “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Everything about the gospel is freedom.

Yet v. 1b shows that gospel freedom can be lost – there is a yoke of slavery to which people who have enjoyed gospel liberty can submit themselves.

The word “again” is important. It reminds us that pagan idolatry and law-reliance are both forms of slavery, whether to immorality or to self-righteousness.

Both of these slaveries must be resisted – we are to “stand firm”. “Stand firm” is essentially a military word, including ideas such as keeping alert, being strong, resisting attack and sticking together.

Summary: We have been saved by Christ, but we must continually be diligent to remember, persevere, rejoice in and live in accord with our salvation.

(b) When Christ has no Value

If we try and mix law-reliance with gospel freedom, the result is that “Christ will be of no advantage to you” (v. 2). Christ is either of total value or he is of no value: it is all or nothing; there are no shades.

The language of vv. 2-4 is strong. Paul avers and affirms that to submit to the law entails being severed from Christ and falling from grace. Either Christ is profitable to us or we are obligated to the whole law. There is no middle ground.

(c) Hoping for What we Have

Instead of striving for a law-based, works righteousness – an effort which is doomed to failure – Paul encourages the Galatian Christians to “eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.”

Colloquially we use the word hope in a weak sense, e.g. “I hope it won't rain tomorrow, but I expect that it will!” But Biblical hope is a certainty, e.g. “My father has promised me a bicycle for my birthday. I know that my father keeps his promises. So a bicycle is my hope, and I am waiting for it with excitement and expectation.”

Paul says, “We ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” What does the last phrase mean? It means the hope that at the last judgement God will pass on us the verdict of “not guilty but righteous”. This verdict will open for us access into the presence of God forever – it is our glory and our joy. And, Paul says, this is ours not through circumcision and works righteousness, but through the Spirit and by faith.

In effect Paul is asking, Do you want to have assurance of salvation? Then turn your mind towards the Christian hope:

- Remind yourself daily that God has given you his Son to secure for you perfect righteousness.
- Remind yourself that this is his gift, given to you graciously.
- Remind yourself that because it is by grace, you have not earned it.
- Remind yourself that because it is by grace, God will not withdraw it from you when you sin.
- Remind yourself that this means you are free from the law as a means of right standing with God.
- Remind yourself that Christ’s righteousness has secured for you an eternal inheritance – for which you wait longingly.

2. Don’t Abuse Your Gospel Freedom, vv. 13-15

Gospel freedom may be lost to legalism (vv. 1-12) or through permissiveness. Paul addresses the latter issue in vv. 13-15. We have been set free (v. 13a), but we must be careful how we use our freedom (v. 13b).

Freedom is not freedom to do whatever you will. Freedom is expressing more clearly, more maturely, with greater variety, your true nature. E.g. the freedom enjoyed by a pianist on the keyboard of a piano.

The Christian has a new “in Christ” nature. This “in Christ” nature is modelled on the nature of God (i.e. made in the image of God). But the law is a revelation of the nature of God. So our new nature in Christ is to reflect more and more the divine nature. This is freedom!

- Gospel freedom cannot be used to indulge our sinful nature. In fact, it puts our sinful nature to death. The gospel kills the motivation to sin.
- Gospel freedom nurtures our “in Christ” nature.

What does the law say? “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength;” and, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” But God is love – and he expressed his love towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So Gospel freedom is expressed through fulfilment of the law (v. 14)! The gospel frees us from the law, for the law! It does away with our old, selfishly motivated and unloving law-obedience. And it motivates us to obey the law out of love.

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11. Gospel Character (Galatians 5:16-25)

In normal religion, the motivation for morality is fear. In contrast gospel Christianity is motivated by the dynamic of love. Now Paul spells out how through the dynamic of love we develop “gospel character”.

1. Two Ways of Life

Verse 16 speaks of “walking by the Spirit” and “gratifying the desires of the flesh”. These are two ways of life in opposition to one another.

The “flesh” is not our physical nature – Paul is not teaching that there is an opposition between the body and the spirit! The “flesh” is our sinful nature, the sin-desiring aspect of our whole nature as opposed to the God-desiring aspect. The God-desiring aspect is the new nature we received when we became Christians; it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Only a Christian faces the opposition between his old nature and his new nature. Paul writes of this opposition in terms of “desire”. The word translated “desire” or “lust” is a mastering desire. The “master-desire” of the sinful nature may be for something otherwise good (companionship, work, leisure) but it uses this object to achieve a deep-seated control of our life.

The Spirit also has a “master-desire” – to show us Christ and to nurture our new “in-Christ” nature so that we become more like Christ.

These two “master-desires” are in conflict. If we walk in step with the Spirit, he will kill the old sinful nature and nurture the new “in-Christ” nature. But of course our experience is that we want to live by the Spirit, but are hindered by our “flesh”. Yet there is hope – if we are walking in step with the Spirit, when we sin we can say, *this is not the real me; this is not what I really want; I want God and his will.*

2. Living for the Flesh

Living to gratify the “master desires” of the sinful nature (v. 16) is equivalent to being “under the law” (v. 18b). And behaving as someone “under the law” means “works”. So Paul proceeds to expose the “works of the flesh”.

Some of these characterise moral, religious people: enmity, jealousy, strife, envy.

Others characterise immoral, irreligious people: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality.

Either way, outside of the gospel, character is controlled by the flesh, and the results are not good.

A community that includes people whose lives are dominated by the flesh (whether they are moral, religious people or immoral, irreligious people makes no difference),

there will be disharmony because “the works of the flesh” include “rivalries, dissension, divisions”.

3. Being Led by the Spirit

To be “led by the Spirit” means to change, and be changed, into the people we want to be. But the word “fruit” alerts us to the fact that the change will be:

(a) Gradual Fruit doesn’t grow overnight, and we do not produce Christ-likeness in a month or a year. But change ought to be tangible over a period of time.

(b) Inevitable If someone has the Spirit of God in them, and they are walking in step with the Spirit, they will produce the fruit of the Spirit. This is the result of the life of Christ in them.

(c) Radical The fruit of the Spirit is not a matter of their temperament. It grows out of their new “in-Christ” nature. Their life in Christ is the root which produces the fruit.

(d) Balanced Paul writes of “fruit” (singular), but speaks of it under nine names. So we may expect to see all nine in each person who walks in step with the Spirit. Of course some people are apparently more “joyful” or “gentle” or “patient” than others – but this is often a matter of temperament rather than the new “in-Christ” nature at work. Temperamental virtues may counterfeit the fruit of the Spirit, e.g. “peaceableness” may be cynicism or indifference.

A close consideration of the fruit of the Spirit reveals that none will be found in isolation from the others, and that we are far more in need of growth in the fruit of the Spirit than we usually think. We need to stop looking at natural strengths as a sign of Christ-likeness, and start challenging ourselves to look at the nature, unity and definitions of the fruit of the Spirit.

What can we do to follow the lead of the Spirit, and so produce the fruit of the Spirit?

(a) Remember that you belong to Christ Jesus (v. 24a). That means that you are “accepted in the Beloved” – your approval and welcome from the Father rests not on your character or actions, but on Christ’s. So do not despair when you are “kept from doing the things you want to do” by your sinful nature – confess your sin and return to the One to Whom you belong.

(b) Remember that because you belong to Christ, you have crucified the sinful nature with its “master-desires” (v. 24a). This goes beyond behaviour (asceticism or abstention) to the root motivation for sin. We sin because we think that the thing we desire will make us who we want to be. But through the cross of Christ our old nature (the root underlying “who we wanted to be”) has been put to death; and we have a new nature, alive in Christ. Use this fact in your struggle with the remnant of your sinful nature.

(c) Walk in step with the Spirit (v. 25). “Walking” is a whole way of life – the whole of life is to be brought in line with the leading of the Spirit. He is a person, with a will, and his purpose is to glorify Jesus by reproducing his likeness in us. Cooperate with him and grant the flesh no quarter.

Galatians for You

12. Gospel Relationships (Galatians 5:26-6:5)

The gospel not only changes our character (study 11), it also shapes the way we relate to other people.

1. Hunger for Honour

“Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”

The idea of “conceit” has to do with “vainglory” or “empty honour”. This is a deep-seated need to prove our worth to ourselves or to other people – we are hungry for honour, and we fear shame.

Our basic “honour-hunger” may find expression in relationships in two ways:

- We “provoke one another”. This is the stance of the person who is sure of his superiority, looking down on others whom he perceives to be weaker. The “superior” person is self-confident and despises those below him.
- We “envy one another”. This is the stance of the person who is conscious of his inferiority, looking up at those he feels are above him. The “inferior” person is self-disdaining and covets the achievements or gifts of the person above him.

In either case, “honour-hunger” describes the natural state of the heart without the gospel. Both the person who assumes the “superior” stance and the person who assumes the “inferior” stance think that they can earn their “worth” – both believe in “works righteousness”.

If I am saved by my works, then I can be either:

- confident but not humble (superior and provoking, because I feel I’m winning);
- or humble but not confident (inferior and envious because I feel I’m losing).

But I cannot be both confident and humble.

Very often this leads to competition. The difference between the “inferior” and the “superior” stances is that the “inferior” person has “lost the game”, despairs about himself, and envies those whom he perceives as the “winners”.

The “superior” person feels that he has won. But he must keep on comparing his performance against that of others to make sure that he is in the lead. And this creates in him nagging insecurity – he is afraid of “inferiority”. This is the experience of many “high achievers”.

2. Gospel-Based Honour

The gospel liberates us from being either self-confident or self-disdaining. But it also makes us both confident and humble! The gospel does this because it:

- humbles me because it tells me that I am a sinner saved by grace;

- and it emboldens me because it reassures me that I am loved and honoured by the one Person in all the universe who really count.

This really does shape the way we relate to other people. For example:

- If you find yourself being defensive in someone's presence (adopting an "inferior" stance), then use the gospel to say to yourself, "Ultimately what this person thinks of me is of no great importance. Jesus Christ's approval and love of me is my righteousness, my identity and my worth."
- Or, if you find that you are looking down on someone (adopting a "superior" stance with respect to them), then use the gospel to say to yourself, "What I think of me is of no significance. I am a sinner, and just as undeserving of the love of Jesus Christ as is this person."

3. Gospel-Based Load-Sharing

The hunger for honour (conceit) leads to competition. When people are in competition, cooperation is limited, and is always tinged by selfish motives:

- It is possible to offer help in a patronizing way because of your sense of superiority.
- It is also possible to offer help grudgingly because you feel that you are disadvantaging yourself and placing yourself in an inferior position.

Neither of these "helps" is the load-sharing commanded by Paul.

But when our honour is gospel-based, then genuine cooperation is possible – we will gladly bear one another's burdens. We will do this without making the other person feel inferior. And we will do it without making them feel that they have imposed on us.

4. Gospel-Based Responsibility

The word translated "burden" in v. 2 has the sense of the pressure of a heavy weight. The word "load" in v. 5 refers to the cargo of a ship, or a backpack – it is the responsibility of the one who carries it: "the demands of practical discipleship."

The person who adopts the "inferior" stance is prone to try and duck under his responsibilities – he might easily justify not stepping up to the mark because he "knows he cannot do it."

But the person who thinks he is "superior" to others might also fail in his discipleship because he compared himself to others and so used too low a standard. He ought to have looked to his Lord and realized that all his genuine inferiorities have been graciously forgiven.

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13. Gospel Life (Galatians 6:6-18)

Paul is doing two things as he signs off. In vv. 6-10 he issues his final warning. And in vv. 11-18 he gives his final invitation. His warning and his invitation are essentially the same message, the message that underlines the whole letter: live by the gospel!

1. You Reap what you Sow

It is the universal principle of agriculture: “Whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (v. 7). If you sow wheat, you will reap wheat. And you will reap it.

“For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption” (v. 8a). Remember what Paul means by “flesh”. It is the old, sinful nature which attempts to control us through “master-desires”. It is at work in both the moral, religious person and the immoral, irreligious person.

So the person whose life is oriented towards the immoral fulfilment of desire is “sowing to the flesh” and – since you reap what you sow – he will reap disintegration from his flesh.

But the person whose life is oriented towards a moral lifestyle of works righteousness is also “sowing to the flesh”, and will also reap corruption.

Christians also sometimes fall back into some kind of slavery to sin – in a certain area of life they may lose their grip on the gospel. For example, a Christian woman who “lives for her family”, or a Christian man who prides himself in the discipline and organisation of his business life, may both begin to imagine that their devotion and their discipline somehow contribute to their right standing with God.

To the extent that we lose our grip on the gospel, to that extent we lose our assurance of salvation. But we don't cease to be Christians, saved by grace.

2. Sowing Well

While the warning is stark, there is also a wonderful promise: “but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (v. 8b). “Sowing to the Spirit” expresses the same relationship expressed by “being led by the Spirit” and “walking in step with the Spirit”.

This is a lifestyle characterized by doing good: “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (vv. 9-10).

This isn't “good works that earn eternal life” – that would just be another form of the slavery of works righteousness against which Paul has written this whole letter! Rather, it is the very practical and potentially costly load-sharing which characterizes

the person whose relationships with others have been transformed by the gospel. Remember that “gospel-based load sharing” is really only possible when we have been set free from the slavery of works righteousness by the gospel (see Study 12).

3. What are You Boasting About?

The heart of your religion is what you boast in. What, at bottom, is the reason you think that you are in a right relationship with God?

Paul’s boasting is only in the Cross of Christ (v. 14) – this is the heart of gospel religion. By contrasting himself with the Judaizers who were advocating circumcision and works- righteousness, Paul is saying, “Follow my example and make the Cross the heart of your relationship with God.”

Crucifixion separated a man from other men – the person the cross was never going to come down and enter society again! So Paul says in v. 14 that the power of the Cross of Christ is seen in that it puts an unbridgeable separation between Christians and the world. The world no longer has any power to enslave me, and the my new “in-Christ” nature (the “new creation” of v. 15) has no desire for the world. This begs the question, “Why, then should I submit to the yoke of slavery once again?”

Comparing v. 15 and 5:6 we see that “a new creation” is the parallel of “faith working through love”. The gospel creates a new motivation for obedience – grateful love arising from a faith view of what Christ has done. This new motivation renews us from the inside out. It is a new birth, a supernatural transformation of character, a new creation.

So vv. 14-15 sum up what it means to rely on what Christ has done, rather than on what I am doing. Paul says: *The gospel changes what I fundamentally boast in – it changes the whole basis for my identity. Nothing in the whole world has any power over me – I am free at last to enjoy the world, for I do not need the world. I feel neither inferior to anyone nor superior to anyone, and I am being made all over into someone and something entirely new.*

4. A Life of Peace

Even as he closes the letter Paul is reminding the Galatians of the message of his letter. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 18) is the entry point to, and the way to continue with, and all we will ever need in, the Christian life. We begin by grace, by being justified by faith in what Christ has done. We continue by grace, not by anything we do.

The gospel of grace is what the Galatians – and WE – need to know, and love. It is not a set of abstract truths. It is a way of life:

deeply fulfilling, secure life now,
and eternal life to come.