



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING  
**Through Love Serve One Another**  
Galatians 5:13-15

September 25, 2011  
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For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup> But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

### Introduction

Some messes are worth making; some aren't. Turning your kitchen upside down to put on an elaborate dinner for close friends or family, that's a mess worth making. Letting your two year old finger-paint on the dinning room table, that's usually a mess not worth making.

*Church is a mess worth making.* Church is, of course, a messy business and is therefore often a messy place. But it's a mess worth making. At least, God thinks so. The church is the precious blood-bought Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25); the church is the means by which God displays his 'manifold wisdom' in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10). God certainly thinks church is a mess worth making!

Unfortunately, some aren't as convinced. Of course, many don't think so. It's tempting to think that churches should be mess-free. And even if you don't think that, you may hope for that. The rest of my life is messy enough. Can't church be that one mess-free zone? But as Paul Tripp rightly says, “While we would like to avoid the mess and enjoy deep and intimate community, God says that it is in the very process of working through the mess that intimacy [and true community] is found.”<sup>1</sup>

The question for us, then, becomes: *How do we work our way through the mess?* That's what this entire section of Galatians is all about (5:13-6:10). This concluding section of Galatians, sometimes called the 'ethical' section of the letter, is really the high-point of the whole. These young churches had made a real mess of things. And Paul writes to help them, first, sort out the mess, which he does in the opening chapters, and then work through the mess, which he does in these closing two chapters.

Hebrews 10:24 is the aim of this message: “Let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works.” And the goal of this message, then, is that each one of you would leave here freshly motivated to work through the relational messes in your life by serving others in love;

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<sup>1</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, p. 12.

in addition, I hope you will lay hold of some specific way in which you can through love serve others in the Body of Christ, here at Calvary or wherever you call your church home.

This passage of Scripture provides the motivation. In these verses three verses we find three motivating words: first, a reminder (v. 13a), second, a warning (v. 13b, 15), and, third, an encouragement (v. 14). Each is intended to stir us up to do the main thing this passage calls us to do: *through love serve one another*. Which, from Paul's perspective, is the very thing the church needs to do to see its way through the mess.

### **Free From Yourself, Free For One Another**

This passage reminds us that *freedom is the foundation of life together*. Neither human relationships, nor human communities, will flourish without being grounded in freedom.

You were called to freedom when God called you into a relationship with himself through his Son, Jesus Christ. As Americans we think of freedom primarily as political or economic freedom. Biblically, however, freedom is primarily relational. You are free insofar as you are in relationship with the living God. Apart from him, there is only bondage—moral and spiritual bondage, or slavery to sin—regardless of whether you live in the United States or North Korea. On the other hand, the more vibrant and intimate your relationship with the living God, the more freedom you will enjoy.

Here's what we all need to understand: we are creatures. And while we may feel like we are autonomous and free, every one of us is under the lordship of powers stronger than we are.

When God calls you to himself, he frees you from yourself. Apart from this powerful and effectual call in your life, you are enslaved to yourself. You are enslaved to what the Bible calls 'the flesh.' The flesh is the fallen self. This is the self turned in upon itself. And we experience our fallen self every single day, every single hour; sometimes it can feel like every single moment.

We experience the fallen self or the flesh in those unruly passions and illicit desires that we find coursing through our bodies. You see in this section of Galatians Paul talks about "the desires of the flesh" (5:16); or a few verses later he refers to "the flesh with its passions and desires" (5:24).

Now, the flesh wouldn't be nearly as lethal if it kept to itself. The problem is that the flesh within each one of us produces 'works' in our lives: specific behaviors that are not only contrary to the will of God, but lethal for human relationships. Paul mentions a number of the 'works of the flesh' in verses 19-21, but he wants to direct the Galatians to the eight works in the middle of the list: "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy" (vv. 20-21).

How does God call us to freedom? He calls us to freedom by calling us to himself and by uniting us to his Son.

### **Abusing Freedom Is A Dead-End**

While the flesh has been crucified, it is not entirely gone. When God calls you to himself through the gospel and unites your life to the life of his crucified and risen Son, your flesh is summarily executed. This liberating spiritual reality is what we celebrate in the line of that

great hymn of Charles Wesley: “He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free.” You become free only by being executed: your sinful, fallen self is crucified with Jesus Christ.

But here’s the challenge: even though the flesh is crucified, it is not altogether eliminated. We still live in these sinful, fallen bodies; and we still inhabit this sinful, fallen world. Therefore, although we eagerly await “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21), we all still live in “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

As a result, the flesh is constantly for an opportunity, not only to invade our lives and take back control of what’s been lost, but also to wage war in us and through us into the lives of other people. The flesh is the sworn enemy of relationships and community; self-centered passions and desires are what wreak all the havoc in our relationships. And the flesh is always looking for a beach-head in your life and mine, which can then become a base of operations from which the flesh can work to undermine every single one of your relationships, whether with God or with your spouse or with your children or with your employer or neighbor or roommate or classmate.

The flesh is utterly ruthless, and will seize every opportunity you give him; of course, he’s always with you, and the world around you is always encouraging you to let down your defenses and let him gain ground.

In what ways do we give the flesh an opportunity to establish a beach-head or even a base of operations in our lives? Here are some of the most common:

We provide opportunity for the flesh when we coddle an unforgiving spirit or harbor a grudge toward another person.

We provide opportunity for the flesh when we fail to overlook minor offenses: As fallen, sinful human being, we continually throw pebbles into one another’s path. That’s inevitable. But Proverbs says it is wisdom to overlook an offense. But because our flesh is so vain and proud, it is so easily offended—often by even the slightest little thing!

When we allow ourselves to put a negative spin on the actions of others: In that magnificent celebration of love found in 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul says that love “believes all things” (v. 7).

When we indulge ourselves in speaking negatively about others: “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers” (James 4:11). “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). It is in view of passages like these that Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to the following bold conclusion: “Thus it must be a decisive rule of all Christian community life that each individual is prohibited from talking about another Christian in secret.” For as he says, “Often we combat our evil thoughts [i.e., the flesh] most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be verbalized.”<sup>2</sup> He then offers this encouragement: “Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the start, individuals will make an amazing discovery. They will be able to stop constantly keeping an eye on others, judging them, condemning them, and

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 94.

putting them in their places and thus doing violence to them. They can now allow other Christians to live freely, just as God has brought them face to face with each other.”<sup>3</sup>

When we engage in conversation with those who are negative, or when we continue in conversation when the conversation turns negative: Conversations can turn negative in various ways, as soon as one of those respectable little vices of the tongue shows up on the scene: things like gossip, critical speech, harsh words, insults, sarcasm, ridicule.<sup>4</sup> We also, frankly, need to avoid negative people. There are some who are chronically negative; they consistently spew criticism or harsh words or sarcasm. As a result, it’s tough to be around them without coming away feeling oily and dirty, somehow you’ve been defiled. Pray for those folks. Seek to build them up in love. But, as a rule, avoid going out for coffee with them.

When we fail to deal with our personal grievances swiftly and directly: In Ephesians 4 we find this instruction: “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (v. 26). But notice what Paul adds, “and give no opportunity to the devil” (v. 27). When we are slow to deal with our personal grievances, we give not only the flesh but the devil himself an opportunity to make inroads in our lives and into our communities. We must deal with personal grievances swiftly. But we also need to deal with them directly, that is, person-to-person and, whenever possible, face-to-face. Here is where we all need to be much more cautious about using technologies for communication. In fact, in the last several months, I’ve come to the conclusion that email is a high-speed landing craft for the flesh. And I’m increasingly convinced that we would all be far better off if we committed to never deliver any bad news to anyone by means of email, but only face-to-face, and where that’s impossible, by telephone, and where that’s impossible, by hand-written letter. It’s far too easy to dehumanize the person you’re addressing when all you’ve got of that person’s presence is perhaps their name in the address bar of the email you’re about ready to fire off.

These are six common ways we give the flesh an opportunity to gain influence in our lives and, through us, into the lives of those we relate to. These are the ways in which the Evil One destroys relationships and kills communities. If we stopped doing these six things, it would change the culture of this church overnight. It would raise the spiritual temperature of this congregation massively.

When the flesh takes over within the life of a church, that community can quickly become a chapter out of *The Lord of the Flies*.

We have both a dog and a cat. Big mistake. All they do is fight. Clemmie, our dog, can’t see Brooklyn, our cat, and not chase her around the house, nipping at her along the way. Now I understand more fully the expression, ‘They fight like cats and dogs.’

## **Fulfilling the Law, Foreshadowing Heaven**

When we abuse our freedom, we lose our freedom. By turning freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, we become not more free, but more enslaved to our own selfish passions and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> See the excellent study of Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*. Chapter 19 deals with ‘sins of the tongue.’

desires. But more than that: we let the flesh make inroads in our lives and into our relationships.

This is why it is so important to be vigilant in guarding against the flesh. You should put up rows of barbed wire, bury landmines, build gun turrets, mount missile defenses, and put in high-tech radar and alarm systems.

This passage reminds us, then, that freedom is the foundation of community. Therefore, we should not abuse that freedom by pursuing our own self-centered passions and desires, but through love serve one another.

This passage, then, seeks to motivate us to serve one another by offering, first, a powerful incentive to loving service of one another, and, second, by giving us a sober warning about what happens when we fail to serve one another that way.

The Apostle Paul says an astonishing thing to the Galatians: by serving one another through love, they in fact fulfill the whole law. This is because, as Paul says, “the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (5:14, cf. Lev. 19:18).

What an astonishing thing for the Apostle to say! And what an encouraging—and motivating—thing for the Galatians to hear! No doubt, the Galatians worried about their own standing vis-à-vis the Jewish law; this is why they were considering circumcision, to make sure they were doing God’s will, which the Judaizers were telling them was to be found in observing the Old Testament law, including of course circumcision.

May I then conclude by pointing you to heaven. For heaven is that ‘world of love,’ as Jonathan Edwards called, that final resting place where we will be at last free from the desires and works of the flesh forever. And will therefore dwell with one another in perfect loving service, joy and delight, forever and ever.

Oh! what tranquility will there be in such a world as this! And who can express the fullness and blessedness of this peace! What a calm is this! How sweet, and holy, and joyous! What a haven of rest to enter, after having passed through the storms and tempests of this world, in which pride, and selfishness, and envy, and malice, and scorn, and contempt, and contention, and vice, are as waves of a restless ocean, always rolling, and often dashed about in violence and fury!

And oh! what joy will there be, springing up in the hearts of the saints, after they have passed through their wearisome pilgrimage, to be brought to such a paradise as this!

Every saint in heaven is as a flower in that garden of God, and holy love is the fragrance and sweet odour that they all send forth, and with which they fill the bowers of that paradise above. Every soul there, is as a note in some concert of delightful music, that sweetly harmonizes with every other note, and all together blend in the most rapturous strains in praising God and the Lamb for ever. And so all help each other, to their utmost, to express the love of the whole society to its glorious Father and Head, and to pour back love into the great fountain of love

whence they are supplied and filled with love, and blessedness, and glory. And thus they will love, and reign in love, and in that godlike joy that is its blessed fruit, such as eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath ever entered into the heart of man in this world to conceive; and thus in the full sunlight of the throng, enraptured with joys that are for ever increasing, and yet for ever full, they shall live and reign with God and Christ for ever and ever!<sup>5</sup>

But do you know what is the best thing to do to keep the flesh at bay? What is most effective is doing the exact opposite: rather than giving into the desires and passions to protect and promote the self, instead we “through love serve one another” (v. 13c).

But how do we serve one another through love? There are many ways in which we can serve one another through love.

We serve one another through love when we pray for one another. This is a vital and yet often overlooked way of serving one another. “Pray for one another” (James 5:16). Praying for our church body in general, but also praying for specific people within the body. It is nearly impossible to harbor negative feelings toward someone you pray for regularly.

We serve one another through love when we bear with one another. “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:1-2). This means deciding to overlook offenses and not let them trip you up. This means letting go of the ways in which others have injured you and not carrying them around. This means, in sum, heeding Peter’s challenge: “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

We serve one another through love when we encourage one another with edifying words. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths,” writes the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4, “but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (v. 29). Let’s strive to be a community that out-speaks the negative 10 to 1.

We serve one another through love when we esteem those who are over us in the Lord. “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12-13). Now, you might think that a bit self-serving for the pastor to say. But I’m glad to say it because of what Paul adds in the very next verse: “Be at peace among yourselves” (5:13). Could it be that the peace of a church body is directly related to the esteem that body shows toward its leadership? I suspect that is what the word of God is saying to us here.

We serve one another through love when we count others more significant than ourselves. “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourself. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:1-4). This is the mind of Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, pp. 351, 352, 353.

## Conclusion: The Mind of Christ

Martin Luther said it so well: “Each of us should become a Christ to the other. And as we are Christs to one another, the result is that Christ fills us all and we become a truly Christian community.”<sup>6</sup>

Through love we serve one another. Yet I suspect everyone realizes that love is not all that easy to come by. True love points not to ourselves, but away from ourselves. It means this: “through the Holy Spirit,” by faith (Ro. 5:5).

We love because God first loved us (1 John). Faith is our response to the gracious love of God displayed in the death and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And as faith is borne in our hearts, so too God causes his own love to be shed abroad in our hearts as well (Rom. 5:5).

There is no one more free than the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet there is no one who is a greater servant of mankind than the man, Jesus Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-7). It is with this mind—the mind of Christ—that each one of us is to have.

But not only are we to imitate the example of Christ, but we are to live with one another in light of the work of Christ. We are to treat one another with grace and mercy because we have been treated that way by Christ. We are to walk by the power of the Spirit of Christ, whom God has sent into our lives and there shed his love abroad in our hearts, so that the love with which we are called to love one another is none other than the love of God coursing through us toward others. And we are to live in light of the gift of faith which God has given us as a free gift; faith that looks away from the self and toward Christ, faith that seeks satisfaction not in pursuit of one’s own passions and desires but in the promises of God.

Some messes are worth making; some aren’t. Church is one of those messes worth making. But the key is knowing how to work through the messes when they arise, which they inevitably will.

This passage calls us to work through the messes we make, whether in church or in life, by serving one another through love. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1-2).

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (Fortress, 2008), p. 84.