

C. The Cross and the Church

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, turn with me back to the letter to the Galatians, chapters 5 and 6. That's page 974, if you're reading in the church Bibles.

Hopefully that hymn has caught us up with the argument so far. And Paul continues in chapter 5, verse 1. For freedom, Christ has set us free.

Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ. You who would be justified by the law.

You have fallen away from grace. For through the spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly await the hope of righteousness.

[1 : 16] For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. You are running well. You are running well.

Who has hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine and that the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed.

I wish those who unsettled you would emasculate themselves. 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. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[2 : 22] But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you're not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. For these are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

But if you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law. Now, the words of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy.

Fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

[3 : 34] Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the spirit, let us also walk by the spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in a transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.

[4 : 38] One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption. But the one who sows to the spirit will from the spirit reap eternal life.

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.

See with which large letters I'm writing to you with my own hands. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised.

And only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh.

[5 : 55] But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers.

Amen. And amen. May God bless to us this his word. Well, do turn with me back to Galatians chapter 5 and 6, page 974, if you've let your Bibles close.

And we'll have a moment to pray. Father God, please draw near to us now as we open your word together. We pray, Lord, that you would banish the things which distract us so easily and make us receptive to your voice.

[7 : 26] Feed us, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Three weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, in December 1941, Churchill stood before the U.S. Congress and said these words.

The United States, united as never before, have drawn the sword for freedom and thrown away the scabbard.

You see, Churchill knew that the cost of freedom was battle. A battle which had to be faced on a united front and which we had to resolve to fight until the end to draw the sword and throw away the scabbard.

And that is very much how Paul continues this letter to the Galatians. The Christian has been freed, verse 1, from both a life of enslavement to the condemning power of sin and slavish human religion. Christ freed us for freedom. So stand firm and don't submit to slavery again. But what is that life of freedom we've been released for?

[8 : 48] Well, the thing that is immediately apparent as you read these last two chapters is that Christ has freed us into a life of battle. Battle to defend our freedom and battle to use it well.

The one thing we're certainly not yet free from is struggle with our sinful flesh. In the cross, we have been fully and wonderfully pardoned.

More than that, God has lavished grace upon us, filling us with his spirit and adopting us as his sons. But if anything, the spirit intensifies the conflict we face.

The two words which dominate this last section and war with each other all the way through chapter 6 are the flesh and the spirit.

But the wonderful news is that as children of God, there is at last a real answer to our sinful human nature.

[9 : 57] Not the hopeless Galatian answer of legalism, but the Christian answer. We're freed for a life lived together in the spirit of Christ.

And that is above all a corporate answer because the spirit of Christ joins us inseparably to the people of Christ. Which is why this new life in the spirit is the sea, the final letter in our Galatian alphabet.

It's the story of the cross and the church. So this evening, Paul is going to show us three ways in which the Christian is liberated by the cross of Christ into a new life lived together in his spirit.

Firstly, in Christ, we're freed for a life which hopes for our future. The cross gives us real solid hope that we will defeat that depressingly constant reality, which is our own nasty, selfish nature.

And if you live in the same world I live in, whether you'd call yourself a Christian or not, and you've struggled for just one day to live a better kind of life, then I'd expect that this is something that really does matter to you.

[11 : 27] We're freed for a life which hopes for our future. But there's something we need to know right from the start about the sort of hope that Paul is talking about.

It's a hope we have right now for something that is not on offer in this life. For through the spirit, by faith, verse 5, we eagerly await the hope of righteousness.

Like those watchmen longing for the morning. The Christian is freed into a life which hopes for our future. That's key to the first 12 verses of our passage and also to the very last paragraph of the letter.

We're going to look at those together. What Paul does there is contrast our future Christian hope with its alternative, which in truth is no hope at all.

And that is a misplaced hope in the presence, in our performance in the flesh. You see, the Galatians are in real danger of surrendering their hope altogether.

[12:36] Because by listening to the legalistic, Judaizing Christians, they're beginning to put it in stuff they do.

It's so tempting, isn't it, to look for reassurance that we're doing okay by measuring our own performance. But that would mean severing themselves, chapter 5, verse 4, from the one true grounds of confidence.

The Lord Jesus. Christian hope is not grounded in anything we can do or touch or achieve now. But we have hope now because while we eagerly wait for the righteousness of verse 5, we're joined through the Spirit by faith to the one who is already righteous.

We have Christ's righteous life working in us, His Spirit. And so we trust, because God has promised it, that we will one day actually be just like our Lord Jesus, righteous.

But not yet. Just glance on to chapter 6, verse 9. Let's not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up.

[14:06] Now here's why this is so important. If we follow the troublemakers and begin to shift the grounds of our hope off the future promise of Christ and onto our performance in the flesh, the only result we'll ever find is crushing discouragement.

So Paul shows us the massive divide between those whose hope through Christ is in the future and those who place their hope in the flesh.

Put confidence there, verse 2. And your hope in Christ's future promise will be of no advantage whatsoever. Begin to put your confidence in your Christian performance.

And verse 4, you're severed from Christ. You've fallen away from grace. And that's as true if it's in circumcision as it is in, say, how well you've controlled your tongue.

Or your use of the internet this week. Either Christ is all your value, or he is no value whatsoever. Notice the pair of bookends that Paul puts around this whole passage to make that contrast absolutely clear.

[15:24] First, chapter 5, verse 6. For in Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

And look on to the very end of the letter, chapter 6, verse 14. It's the same thing. Far be it from me, says Paul, to boast in the now stuff, in the flesh.

Through Christ the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Do you hear how they echo each other? What counts is the life to come at work in us now through the Spirit. So at both ends of the passage, Paul shows us what a life based on that alternative, false hope in the flesh looks like.

What drives the troublemakers in the last paragraph of chapter 6? It's boasting in the Galatians' flesh. Verse 13. In the now stuff.

[16:39] They want a church which looks good on the outside. It's a little like the way people today might boast in the numbers. They want a church that's a good church that's a good church that won't look too different to the Jewish world outside.

It's those who want to make a good showing in the flesh, who would force you to be circumcised and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

Their hope is in their performance now. They brag in their success now. And their ultimate fear is persecution now.

Back to chapter 5, verse 11. But if I still preach persecution, says Paul, a gospel without the scandal of grace, then I wouldn't still be being persecuted the way I am.

Paul's motivation is something far greater than what's on offer now, isn't it? It turns out that it's the legalists who are taking the easy way out.

[18 : 00] They put pride in the things they manage and ease off the gas when it comes. To living the genuinely distinctive life in the spirit, which Paul is about to lay out for us.

But their message is poison, isn't it? It robs us of the only real grounds for hope. That's why Paul's language is so strong.

It's right to be angry. I wish this circumcision bunch would go the whole hog, verse 12. I wish they'd emasculate themselves. Waiting and trusting Christ while his spirit works within us is not an easy answer.

There is no secret trick to holiness. But we wait the way a son waits to inherit something he's been promised.

That was the language of the last chapter. And that's a life of real hope, isn't it? Hope in the one who really can deliver what we long for.

[19 : 06] Secondly, the life we live while we wait for that hope of righteousness will look radically different to a life lived hoping in ourselves.

It's a life of radically different relationships to God himself, to God's law, and to each other. We're freed, secondly, for a life which honors our father.

That's our second point from verse 13 to 25. Freed for a life which honors our father. And this is where we'll spend the bulk of our time on the great battle of the life and the spirit.

But first, verse 13 begins this section by telling the Galatians how to spend their new life of freedom. The enslaving function of the law wasn't simply removed to let the flesh have its own way, unhindered by God's rules. In fact, the whole purpose of our new lives is to serve one another through love.

[20 : 17] And immediately, verse 14, Paul explains that that means fulfilling the law. Now let's just pause for a moment and notice what a crucial point verse 14 makes.

It ties everything that Paul is about to say about the new life in the spirit to everything he's already said in this letter about a legalistic relationship to the law of Moses.

But isn't it rather strange, a little odd, given that Paul is writing this letter to deal with legalism, that he closes his argument by telling Christians to fulfill the law.

In fact, it's something of a habit of his through these last two chapters. And right at the end, chapter 6, 13, he gives his final verdict on the troublemakers, the ones harping back to Moses.

They, it turns out, are lawbreakers. Isn't that surprising? The Christian life, it seems, which Christ has freed us for, is a life of law keeping.

[21 : 27] So what's going on? Has Paul reverted back to being a Pharisee? Well, the answer, as we saw in chapter 4, is that God's adopting us in Christ sets us free to see his law, not like a child or like a slave, but like a mature son.

We've been freed to understand God's law the way a grown-up son understands his father. We don't see it anymore, like the Judaizers, as a way to win his respect, desperately trying to earn it. We see it as a way to love and honor him. The way a son honors his father isn't by slavishly keeping all the rules he was given as a child.

It goes deeper than that, doesn't it? A mature son sees why his father gave him those rules. He sees what his father wanted from him, what the rules were all about.

So right now, I'm constantly telling my toddler not to open the cupboard doors in the kitchen and pull out all the stuff and make a mess. In fact, yesterday I was telling her not to rip off the cupboard doors altogether.

[22 : 40] But when she's older, I'll be telling her to open the kitchen doors and tidy away the mess. And in both cases, my reason is nothing to do with cupboard doors.

It's that I want her to give her mother a break. Well, chapter 5, 13 reminds us of the reason behind God's law.

What God has always required of his people all along is love.

It's always been a law of love. To love our gracious God with all our hearts and soul and mind and strength. And as the overflow of that, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

To love others in that selfless way that he loves. Jesus said the whole Old Testament hung on that. So even if our application of the law on this side of the cross will look rather different, it's not as if God has simply changed his mind about what pleases him.

[23 : 53] Jesus didn't simply do away with the intent of the law. He did something far better than that. He took the curse of the law for us.

He freed us to live like sons. Not in fear of punishment. But free to please our Father who loves us. Isn't it wonderful to be able to do that?

Surely the grace we've known in Christ puts us under more obligation to love and honor our Father, not less. So Paul is able to say that love is the grown-up way to follow God's law.

That's why verse 6, what counts is faith working through love. It's why chapter 6, verse 2, bearing each other's burdens is fulfilling the law of Christ.

It's why these prideful and manipulative troublemakers are unable to keep the law, no matter how many people they circumcise. What they're doing is creating boundaries between people and reasons for pride.

[25 : 06] So verse 16 of chapter 5 is the killer verdict on the religious man's solution to human nature, isn't it? Ironically, it's the very opposite of what the law demands.

Not lovingly serving each other, but prideful backbiting and bickering. Legalism cannot lead to love. Ultimately, it is completely and utterly useless as an answer to the sinful desires of our flesh. So in verse 16 comes Paul's answer.

The only real solution is Christ at work in us. The thing that honors our Father is love. And Jesus, who showed us what love is, is the one who works that love in us through his spirit.

So the moment we come to Christ, and he takes possession of us, a great battle begins. A battle between two implacably opposing forces, which will not cease until one of those forces is dead.

[26 : 29] The life which honors our Father is a life of battle and struggle between the flesh and the spirit. Ten times in this closing section of the letter, Paul uses the word flesh, and ten times he uses the word spirit.

The flesh is everything in us that says me, not Christ. And the spirit is Christ in me. The flesh craves, or literally over-desires, the things which feed and gratify me.

But the spirit in us craves those Christ-like qualities, which selflessly serve others, fulfilling that law of Christ.

The things these works of the flesh have in common, verse 19, is that they're all me-centered. They please and gratify me.

Selfish sexual appetites, verse 19. Self-serving religious superstition, idolatry, sorcery. Selfish relational attitudes, envy, anger, divisiveness.

[27 : 41] And a selfish appetite for food, and stimulants, and alcohol. They please me at the expense of others. But the spirit produces precious, wholesome fruits, qualities in us, which delight and cherish others.

And they're all relational, aren't they? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Don't you long for those fruits?

Every time I lose my temper at home or thoughtlessly upset somebody yet again, something in me aches to look more like that.

Don't all of us? And that is Christ in us, longing for us to live as the mature son that he is, honoring our father's law of love.

And so, verse 17, the two can never come to a truce. The life we're free for is a life of struggle between two competing desires. But just notice that although the battle is lifelong and grueling, and the spirit and the flesh are not equal partners, Paul's already told us, hasn't he, that we're eagerly waiting for the final victory of one over the other, the hope of righteousness, it will come.

[29 : 16] And he tells us now to walk by the spirit. In other words, we can choose as Christians liberated from that enslaving power of sin to cultivate and value the things which the spirit longs for.

Verse 18 is here to encourage us, isn't it? If we're led by the spirit, which in this letter has been code for every one of us who's trusted in Christ crucified, if we're led by the spirit, then we are no longer under law.

The law no longer condemns us for our flesh because Christ has been condemned in the flesh already. And verse 24, those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its desires and passions.

He's speaking this time about an active thing we do as Christians, decisively nailing our old natures to the cross. We did it at our conversions when we pledged ourselves to Christ and we do it day after day as we resolve to say no to the flesh and live for our father as forgiven children.

Now, if you're anything like me, reading a passage like this can be incredibly discouraging. We long for a quick fix, don't we? It's not easy listening to somebody who tells us that it just doesn't let up.

[30 : 53] But discouragement would be the wrong way to respond to this. John Chapman was one of the great evangelists and Bible teachers of our age.

He was a legend of a man, a godly, mature Christian. But when he died last year at the age of 82, the front cover of the briefing simply read this.

John Chapman, the first 82 years are the hardest. Now, if I've ever seen an obituary worth dying for, that is it.

Not someone who had it all sorted, but a man who persevered humbly in the strength of God's spirit. That is the testimony of a good and faithful servant, isn't it?

Paul's writing this not to discourage us, but as a battle cry. Struggle and toil and tears are the sign of victory in the Christian life, not failure.

[32 : 04] Paul's been showing us all along that the spirit is the one sure sign of belonging to Christ. Christ. And that will immediately bring us into conflict with our flesh.

So you see, struggle, even failure, however depressing it is, those are the signs that he is at work in us. The signs of a true child of God.

Perfectionism is more a mark of the troublemakers, isn't it? It's the idea that you can sort yourself out with a few extra rules. There's nothing Christian about that at all. It's that there's no sign of struggle that you need to be worrying.

So Paul says, verse 25, keep going. The Christian is freed, however much he struggles, to walk in step, to honor his father's law of love.

And that means, first and foremost, loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because thank God we haven't been abandoned to a lonely struggle, simply fending for ourselves against the flesh.

[33 : 20] Being joined to Christ automatically joins us to each other. His law of love automatically obligates us to each other. So for the last few minutes, as the letter closes, Paul shows us what both the flesh and the spirit look like at work in the corporate life of the church.

14 times in this section, Paul uses words like, one another, anyone, the household, the family, the one who does this and the one who does that. And the basic point is that we're freed to help each other in the fight.

5 verse 26 to the end of the letter. We're freed to help each other in the fight. Verse 26 kicks off this last stretch with a second let us sentence.

Do you notice that? It's the flip side of let us walk by the spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

You can't be, can you? Because the spirit of Christ tells us that we're battling too. That's why Peter earlier on was not just walking out of step with other Christians, but remember chapter 2?

[34 : 41] He was walking out of step with the gospel of grace itself. God So now Paul gives us a picture of a church with both the fruit of the spirit and the works of the flesh put into action.

Verses 1 to 10 show us what a church free of that pride and conceit should look like. And then as we've seen already there's that final warning about the church ruled by pride and self-preservation. all the hallmarks of the works of the flesh. So just notice when the spirit rules where our focus should be in verses 1 to 10 it's on each other.

So two things stand out. They restore each other graciously and they invest in each other for the long fight. Brothers verse 1 if anyone is caught in any transgression you who are spiritual should restore him with a spirit of gentleness.

Bear one another's burdens verse 2 and so fulfill the law of Christ. The Christ who lovingly bore our great burden who showed us what love looks like.

[36 : 02] Church is a hospital ward isn't it where broken people help other broken people to walk in step with the spirit of Christ. But keep watch on yourself lest you too are tempted verse 1.

If you think you're something when you're nothing that's the conceit showing then you deceive yourself. A proud graceless person who thinks they could never fall into a similar struggle well they're never going to help restore a brother entangled in sin are they?

If you've never realized that you could be trapped and ensnared like that or that you have been in the past then how can you possibly help the rest of us?

You're still so blind to your own heart that you've got no business messing in us. A proud Christian is a bit like that elderly Spanish lady who took it upon herself last year to restore a precious fresco in her parish church.

Do you remember that story? She barged in so confident in her own ability that she completely destroyed a priceless old painting. It started off looking like Christ and ended up like a cross between Terry McCutcheon and a gorilla.

[37 : 30] It's a serious point though. Restoration is a delicate tender job isn't it? Unless we're a church of gracious tender hearted people unless we're prepared to get our hands dirty in each other's lives well then none of us will make it through the battle.

We need each other don't we to lovingly correct and encourage each other to help each other along. Do we believe that? If not the flesh will get the upper hand every single time.

The church ruled by the spirit restores each other graciously and then from verse six you see them investing each other for the long haul for the long fights. They share or partner in teaching and applying the Bibles to each other's lives.

They sow to the spirit and not to the flesh. In other words they invest in and cherish those Jesus like qualities. They look out for each other like a family, a household verse 10.

Financially, pastorally, however they can. And all that investment in each other is for long term results. The time and money and tears they've spent on each other aren't lost.

[38 : 57] it's all seed which they've planted at great cost but in certain hope that in due season they'll reap a wonderful crop.

What a contrast with the people Paul grabs the pen to warn them about in verse 11. Instead of humbly restoring they're boasting.

Instead of helping each other they're investing in this age. It's all about self preservation verse 12.

So for the last time Paul reminds them and us his gospel is about deliverance from this age.

What matters is a new creation at work in our hearts now and as the thing we've set our hope on for the future. That's why verse 17 is Paul's trump card.

Here's the proof he says of my gospel. Of course Paul was circumcised too. He was a Pharisee once. But he doesn't point to that.

[40 : 12] No, if you want a mark in the flesh, a badge of truly belonging to Christ, then it was his back you needed to look at.

the scars on Paul's back from beatings and scourging, they were the marks of truly Jesus-like, self-giving fruit.

If the spirit of Christ brings us into conflict with this age, then surely those scars cried out louder than words that Paul was a man walking in step.

He'd given of himself. That's something cold, dead religion could never produce, isn't it? But the gospel of a loving, self-giving, crucified Christ, well, that really could transform the church.

A life shaped by his spirit is not an easy answer. But it's the only way for the true Israel of God to walk. We've tasted freedom.

[41 : 28] We've been purchased by grace. So let's lovingly, humbly, graciously help each other along while we walk that long, hard road to glory.

Let's pray. Amen. Father God, we thank you so much for these great truths of the gospel, that Christ died for us, and that the life of Christ works in us, even us, through your spirit.

Help us, Lord, together as your people to walk in step with your spirit. spirit. We long for our friends, for our city to look at this church and see those wholesome, gracious, Christ-like qualities, the life of your son in us and through us.

Let that be true, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.