

The Naked Emperor

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to the Bible and to our reading this evening, which you will find in Paul's letter to the Galatians at chapter 5. Rupert is continuing this study that he's taken up again in this very important letter.

If you have a church Bible, it's page 975. And we're going to read this evening from verse 13 of chapter 5 down to verse 25.

And watch out. You'll see there's a lot here about how we walk. Verse 13. Paul says, 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. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you're not consumed by one another. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desire of the flesh.

[1 : 13] For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are 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 works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, and orgies, and things like these.

I warned 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.

Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Amen.

[2 : 30] May God bless to us his word. Well, that's a pretty good prayer, isn't it? So why don't you turn to Galatians chapter 5, verse 13, page 975.

Amen. Sometimes knowing who a person is speaking to makes all the difference in the world as to how you understand them.

Just think of a simple everyday sentence, at least in other parts of the world. Today's going to be a beautiful day. Today's going to be a beautiful day. Spoken by a weather forecaster, those words just convey a bit of mundane information.

Less than average rainfall, perhaps even a day like today. But what if it's a father speaking those words to his little girl on the morning of her wedding day?

Then they take on a totally different character, don't they? Today's going to be a beautiful day. He's saying, don't you worry, darling. Let's enjoy it. I think of those same words spoken in a hospice.

[3 : 50] The patient's exhausted. The atmosphere is gray. And the nurse knows there won't be too many of these days left. But with a smile on her face, she throws open the curtains and props him up in bed.

Today's going to be a beautiful day. And those same mundane words mean something very different again, don't they? Something my wife enjoys about no longer being pregnant is that overnight it's become socially unacceptable to pat her on the stomach and say, aren't you looking huge?

Say that to a pregnant lady. And they have to grin and bear it. Say it to her now. Well, and I've got to be honest, I pity the poor fool who tries. You see the point, don't you?

Who a person is speaking to makes all the difference in the world as to how we understand the message. And I think we tend to read Galatians 5 as if Paul were the weather forecaster, conveying bland general information to humanity.

There's some stuff about love, a summary of some fruits of the spirit, and another list of what bad people tend to be like. And we read it and think, well, I suppose that's moderately interesting and a little bit convicting.

[5 : 06] I should probably respond by looking into my own heart and deciding which kind of person I am. But what if, in fact, these words were just as poignant as the one spoken by the father of the bride or the nurse in the hospice?

What happens if we remember the particular people that Paul was speaking these words to? Well, I think something very interesting happens then because this becomes the moment that Paul looks his Galatian church in the eye and tells the emperor he's got no clothes on.

He isn't just spelling out generalities here. He's saying, take a long, hard stare at yourselves in the mirror. Look at these elite teachers of yours who've been troubling you with their approach to godliness.

Look carefully at their lives and tell me what you see. Are they making progress? Are they really being shaped and restored by God's law?

No, they talk the talk. But it's time someone called them out. Those religious gurus of yours are strutting about absolutely starkers.

[6 : 23] And what's more, they've got knobbly knees and a bulging midriff and spindly little chicken legs. It's time to stop fawning to them and think again about what it is that Jesus truly calls his people to be.

Do you see his point? It's not so much look into your own heart and tell me what fruit you see. The message really is take a look at yourselves, you Galatians, and ask which approach to the Christian life do you really want to be following?

Which one delivers what it promises? Mine or these super religious troublemakers? Remember, this has been a letter all about how real Christians walk.

Back in chapter 2 at that disastrous church lunch, Peter was accused of walking out of step with what he believed. And now we've come right back to the same idea, haven't we?

Look how it bookends the big paragraph on our passage. Verse 16, walk by the Spirit. Verse 25, keep in step with him.

[7 : 30] Keep walking. Keep in step with him. You see, the troublemakers in Galatia, they preyed on people's doubts and discouragement with the Christian life. They were the gurus who could tell you how to grow, how to master the real spiritual discipline.

But what Paul is exposing here is that these godly Christians haven't even got the basics. They were neither truly free in Christ nor truly friends with Christ.

They didn't really love God or his law, the law they so cherished, at least on the surface. And you could tell all of that because their walk was out of step with Jesus' gospel.

So far from being a passage that just beats us up and make us feel even more depressed about our sin, And I think for Paul's ordinary Galatian Christians, what he had to say here was surprisingly encouraging.

He's writing as a loving pastor, isn't he? To reassure them that the marks of a true Christian are not the marks they've been so worried about.

[8 : 44] You don't need to look like your religious gurus. That's his message. In fact, why on earth would you want to be anything like them? No, the sign of a true Christian is not the great religious feats they parade in front of you.

A true Christian is someone who's struggling away with their sinful nature. They might not look like they're winning, but at least they're fighting. And they fight because they love their father and they love his law.

And as a result, they love his people. And that's what truly matters. That's real faith. So we've got two points this evening about what real Christianity looks like.

The real mark of freedom in Christ and the real mark of friendship with Christ. But each time strutting around in the background is that naked Galatian emperor.

The Christianity of these religious gurus. So firstly, in verses 13 to 15, the message is something rather surprising. Real freedom in Christ makes us slaves to each other.

[9 : 56] True freedom in Christ makes us slaves to each other. How do you spot the religious emperor with no clothes on? Well, he hasn't yet learned what real freedom means. And so the kind of language Paul uses here in verse 13 would just sound like contradictory nonsense to him.

You are called to freedom, brothers. Only don't use that freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. That's your own selfish nature. But through love, become slaves of one another.

You are called to freedom to become a servant to love. Now I wonder if that sounds like real freedom to you. You see, to the religious man, life is ultimately about serving yourself.

Working your way up the moral ladder. And yet the Christian knows that Christ rescued us from slavery so that we could become slaves to his ways.

And that, says Paul, is real liberation. Learning how to live and to love like our liberator. Like a true human being made in the image of his creator.

[11 : 09] Think of a husband, perhaps, who's still so enslaved to his selfish needs and desires that he sees love for his wife as a burden.

Yes, of course, it's something you have to do. Otherwise, you risk dinner being served late and the dishes going unwashed and a cold shoulder at bedtime. But love to a man like that is just a means of getting what he wants back from her, isn't it?

To him, serving his wife is a form of slavery. It's a burden. And that's the love of a legalistic man.

But the husband who's truly free from serving himself, he's free to love in a very different way.

It's a joy for him to love his wife. He can ask himself, how can I best serve her, meet her needs, help her grow? That's the kind of service which only a free man can enjoy giving.

And so here comes the surprise, I think, the moment the emperor is exposed. Because the way we love, according to Paul, reveals what we truly think about God and his law.

[12 : 25] Remember, the whole approach of these legalistic troublemakers was that to make progress in God's eyes, we depend on observing Jewish law.

But what does Paul say in verse 14? He says that, frankly, this super religious group just don't take God's law seriously enough.

Because they haven't realized that the law isn't about us. It isn't a guide to becoming a better me. No, God's law is about each other.

That's what God's heart is like, isn't it? The whole law, verse 14, is summed up in one word. And that word is love. Now, he's told us as much already in verse 6, hasn't he?

Love is the only thing that counts. Faith without love at its heart is no faith at all. That's all God's ever wanted from his people. But that is the one thing these legalists lack.

[13 : 26] And here's where Paul does something slightly odd. If you want to sum up the whole law, to sum up what it is that God wants from his children, I think there's a pretty obvious place in the Bible to turn.

Because when Jesus was asked that question, what's the law all about? He went straight to Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 5. Here's the most important of all the commandments.

He said, love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might. But that isn't where Paul turns, is it?

He goes to a different book. He goes to the book of Leviticus, to the command that Jesus said comes second. The whole law of us 14 is fulfilled in one word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Now, why would Paul do that, do you think? I suspect he knows just like Jesus that any real love for God is going to show itself in how we treat each other.

[14 : 28] And right the way through this letter, that's what Paul's been interested in, isn't it? He's been interested in something much more than theology, how we're forgiven, justified.

He's been interested in seeing our justification in action. He wants to see that this church has understood grace by the way they treat each other.

So how do you wake up a proud, legalistic church who are utterly convinced that it's them and only them who really love the Lord?

Well, you get them to take a long, hard look at themselves in the mirror. And what they see, verse 15, is backbiting and gossip and tearing each other apart.

So much for love, so much for God's law. What becomes plainer and plainer over the rest of this letter is that the people he's aiming at there in verse 15 are precisely the same people who are so into circumcision and external holiness.

[15 : 34] The ones who seem to make such a fuss about observing the law. Because by focusing on rules and boundaries, we can convince ourselves that we're doing just fine, that everyone else is the problem.

And that's how we start to make opportunities for the flesh, isn't it? And so verse 15 is Paul's killer verdict on the religious man's answer to life in this awkward age.

The religious solution to our selfish, sinful human nature. Ironically, it's the ones harping back to Moses, whose lives are furthest from God's law.

Because legalism cannot lead to love. Legalism does not take you where the law was leading. As an answer to the sinful desires of our flesh, it is completely and utterly useless.

That whole human approach to godliness, Paul is saying, just doesn't work. So you see, it's not Paul who doesn't care about God's law for all the mud that I imagine they throw at him.

[16 : 47] In fact, he's the one who's seriously interested in it, isn't he? Just not as a cold, self-serving way to win respect from God and praise from the church.

Our Westminster Shorter Catechism asks a very helpful question, one that every forgiven human needs to ask. It asks this, what is the duty that God requires of man?

And the answer it gives is this, obedience to God's revealed will. Well, it's a good, clear answer, isn't it?

And it's fleshed out well over the next few questions. But I suspect that if you ask Paul or Jesus or Moses, they might make that same answer even more simple.

Our duty as God's wonderfully forgiven children is love. Now, where does that leave us? We know now, don't we, why God has rescued us.

[17 : 51] The whole purpose of our freedom is to be made into lovers, into a holy people who fulfill God's wonderful law. But how do we do that?

Aren't some people just more loving than others? Are we expected to somehow whip up all the right feelings inside ourselves? Well, no. Love, as Paul is using it, is something much more than just a feeling.

In fact, there's a very definite shape to it here. Verse 13 is actually quite specific. Through the love, you could read it, serve one another. And when you look at the picture Paul paints of that love over the next few paragraphs, it becomes pretty obvious what he's talking about.

It's a kind of love that is self-giving and other person-centered and sacrificial. In short, it is Jesus' kind of love, which is hardly a surprise, is it?

If this kind of love was at the heart of God's law, then it's no big surprise that it reflects the one who gave that law. It's the law which shapes and defines what true love is, which is why we see it so perfectly in the law giver, the law keeper.

[19 : 13] However, the kind of love which counts is Jesus' kind of self-giving love at work within us, his people. Love that urges us to say no to ourselves, not to be served, but to serve each other.

So we don't love by trying to conjure up the right emotions. We love, according to Paul in this next paragraph, when Jesus' spirit takes hold of our hearts and calls us to sacrifice our selfish behaviors, which is really what this next section is all about.

We've seen that real freedom in Christ makes us slaves to each other. And now in verses 16 to 25, we're going to learn something about real friendship with Christ.

Real friendship with Christ makes us war with ourselves. Freedom means slavery and friendship means war.

Now, Jesus' name may only come once in this paragraph, but the whole section is about fighting to love his way, fighting to walk with him.

[20 : 29] Those are the bookends, aren't they, that surround the whole thing. Keep walking in step with Christ's spirit. Because walking with Jesus, verse 16, is the only real solution to those sinful desires of our flesh.

What loveless religion could never do, his spirit does in spades. And if that sounds like an easy answer, well, let me warn you that these verses make pretty hard reading.

Because what they're describing is an all-out war between the God of the universe and the things that you and I most love and cherish.

It's the great battle that begins that the very moment Christ's spirit takes possession of a human being. Ten times, I think, in this closing section of the letter, Paul uses the word flesh.

And ten times, he uses the word spirit. And those two are at war. The flesh is everything in us that says, me, not Christ.

[21 : 33] And the spirit is Christ in me. The flesh craves the things which feed and gratify me. But the spirit in us craves those Christ-like qualities which serve others, fulfilling God's law of love.

And so battle commences between these two implacably opposed forces, verse 17. A battle which will not let up until one of those forces is dead.

But the key piece of intelligence, I think, comes in verse 18. It's a simple reminder, really, which Paul inserts into the argument to encourage us that this war is not an even fight.

But since you're led by the spirit, you're no longer under the law. Now, all Christians are led by the spirit, aren't they? That's just how Paul talks about believers in this letter.

And since that's the case, he's saying you aren't driven by the legalist's approach to the law anymore. That's what it means not to be under it. The law is no longer the thing you enslave yourself to as your only hopeless, graceless solution to sin.

[22 : 49] The law here stands for that flesh-driven, twisted understanding of the Christian life. But if you trust Christ, there is a far greater power at work in you than that.

Even if, from your perspective, it just feels like one long, hard battle. We said last week that Jesus' spirit taking possession of us can feel like petrol being poured on the flames of our struggle. It doesn't make them go away. The reality is that as Christians, we just feel the battle more acutely. And so let me draw your attention to what must be one of the most uncomfortable words in the New Testament.

It comes about halfway through verse 19 in our translation. It's the word evident. It is perfectly evident, says Paul, when our lives are being driven by our own selfish, sinful natures.

Isn't that an uncomfortable thought? All those behaviors that we cover up with our religion, those things we'd like to think we've hidden pretty well. The truth is they are perfectly plain to see.

[24 : 05] And if you're squirming a little bit here, I think there's a reason Paul wants his readers to do that. Because once again, he's pointing at the naked emperor, isn't he?

He doesn't just want them to look into their own hearts. He wants them to look around the church at the people they're following and ask, how well is their answer to the flesh working out?

Look around, he's saying, and it should be perfectly evident. Which group is relying on their own goodness and religious effort to please the Lord? If you think of this letter as a portrait of the false teachers, then what we have here in verses 19 to 21 are the colors that Paul's been using.

These works of the flesh are the palette that he's been painting the legalists with all along. And as he finishes that portrait in chapter 6, we'll see that clear as day.

These aren't just random. It's not an exhaustive list. This is very contextual, I think. The things which these works of the flesh have in common, verse 19, is that they're all me-centered.

[25 : 16] They're all the things which our flesh lets us get away with when it's our flesh we're trusting in. Selfish sexual appetites, verse 19.

Self-serving religious superstition, idolatry, sorcery, trying to manipulate God into serving us. Selfish relational attitudes, anger, envy, divisiveness.

And selfish appetites for alcohol and stimulants and food. All the things which please and gratify me at the expense of others. Now, brothers and sisters, if we don't read that list and recognize an awful lot that still lurks within our own hearts, then surely we don't know ourselves very well.

My flesh is more than capable of all of it, I can tell you. Every day, it cries out, me and not Christ.

And if you think you're any different, then let me recommend that you take a Ryanair flight like I did last week.

Boy, is that a revealing experience. I sat through that flight reading a Christian book and thinking Christian thoughts. And when the plane landed and the doors took forever to open and people started pushing and shoving and faffing about in the aisle, something incredibly ugly began to boil up inside me.

[26 : 41] And of course, I had all sorts of excuses, didn't I? I had a pregnant wife at home. I was in a hurry. But no one else on the plane could see that. What they could see, plain as day, was a very grumpy, angry, impatient man.

To my shame, I think that must have been perfectly evident. A total stranger on that flight could have looked at me in that moment and known that my self-centered flesh had the upper hand.

And something ugly like that lurks in all of us, if we're honest. You don't have to scratch us very deep to find our true natures, do you? But what if it's that ugly human nature, our flesh, that we count on to make us something?

What if as a church we start to rely on a gospel not from God, but from self-absorbed human beings? That's been Paul's charge against the Galatians, hasn't it, all along?

It's a human gospel, a gospel of religion and church attendance and law-keeping. They're fighting flesh with flesh. Well, the outcome is not going to be pretty, is it?

[27 : 59] And I think that's what Paul wants to show us. This is where legalistic human religion gets you. Look around the church, and it will be plain as day who's pushing it.

Whereas those walking in step with the Spirit of Jesus Christ are the ones fighting not for themselves, but for each other.

They're all relational, aren't they? These fruit of the Spirit, qualities in us which delight and cherish other people. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Don't you long for those qualities, you Christians? Every time I lose my temper with the kids or thoughtlessly upset someone in church, something in me, deep down, aches to have dealt with it more like this.

Aren't you the same? Well, that is Christ in us, longing for us to live his law of love. And friends, that longing is the most reassuring experience a Christian can ever know in this world.

[29 : 16] If you feel like a failing, crummy excuse for a believer, then take heart. Because it's our grief and frustration which tell us that Jesus' Spirit is at work.

There's nothing in Paul's understanding of the Christian life that suggests a person who's arrived. To think like that is more a mark of the religious lot, isn't it? In fact, the way Paul describes the ordinary Christian life, verse 24, is as a kind of death.

Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. That doesn't mean, of course, we've beaten them. It just means that we've nailed them decisively to Christ's cross.

We did it once and for all on the day of our conversion when we trusted him to pay the penalty. And we do it again day after day as we battle to say no to ourselves and serve others in love.

Because the cross is always where Jesus' Spirit is going to pull us. Real friendship with Christ means war with ourselves.

[30 : 29] A war that can only end in death. Not a quick death and not an easy one. But verse 24, those who truly belong to him have counted that cost.

We recognize that everything about us has to die alongside Christ. And that fight, that life of loving and dying is true freedom.

True friendship with Jesus. Does it sound like it to you? One of my favorite writers to give away to people is an evangelist from Australia called John Chapman.

He was a legend of a man, a godly, mature Christian who wrote about the gospel with beautiful simplicity. And when he died at the age of 82, he had one of the best obituaries I've ever seen.

The front cover of the briefing magazine simply read this. Chappo's legacy. The first 82 years are the hardest. Now if I've ever seen an obituary worth dying for, surely that's it.

[31 : 41] It's not the mark of someone who thought they had it all sorted, is it? But a man who persevered humbly through weakness and temptation in the strength of God's spirit.

That is the testimony of a good and faithful servant, isn't it? The first 82 years are the hardest. You see, there's nothing remotely Christian about perfectionism.

In fact, it's if there's no sign of struggle that we need to worry. But to every weary and war-torn Christian who looks around the church and wonders if they've got something wrong, our apostle says, keep going.

Keep walking. Keep submitting to Christ's spirit who says, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.

because that is why I gave you your freedom. Let's pray. Father God, the words we've read force us to say thank you and forgive us and please help.

[32 : 55] Thank you for all you've freed us from in the cross of your son. The inability in our flesh to do anything good the hatred and the anger it deserved. Forgive us, Father, for all you've shown us still lurking in our hearts for our lack of love for each other which speaks so painfully of our lack of concern for you.

And please help us, Lord, to walk in step with the spirit of your son not to rely on rules and resolutions that only let us get away with more.
But instead, Lord God, help us to submit day by day to our king of love. for we ask it all in the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us.
Amen.