

Duty

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[0 : 00] Now, last week, we began a little series looking at Paul's description of the real Christian life. From the end of his letter to the Galatians, we've been considering his four marks of true liberty, beginning last week with hope.

Hope not in our own flesh or Christian performance or anything we can have now, but a hope we wait for, he said, by faith in the righteousness which the Lord Jesus will give us when he comes to make all things new.

That was last week. So today we come to chapter 5 of Galatians, verses 13 to 25, and that's on page 975 in the Blue Vistas Bibles.

And it's Paul's second, rather surprising sign of real freedom. So he begins in verse 13 by echoing the war cry which he began this whole section with in verse 1.

For you were called to freedom, brothers, only do not use your freedom, verse 13, as an opportunity for the flesh. Rather, through love, serve one another.

[1 : 15] 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.

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.

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, or rather since you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law.

Now the works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality or debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, 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.

[2 : 49] Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Since we live by the spirit, let us also walk by the spirit. Well, let's pray for our father's help before we look at these words together.

Lord Jesus, we give you thanks for bringing us together once more and for bringing us under your word. We give you thanks for the life and health and peace that we enjoy.

We give you thanks that to everyone here who owns you as our savior, you have made us sons of your father in heaven, free to will and to work for his good pleasure.

And so we ask that you would work in us now and teach us what it means to belong to you and help us to submit to your will for the glory of your precious name.

[4 : 00] Amen. Carved into stone at the heart of a war grave on the far corner of the Commonwealth, there's one carefully calculated line of verse.

When you go home, tell them of us and say, for their tomorrow we gave our today. Those are words which are meant to challenge the readers, aren't they?

It's as if one now silenced generation of men is looking at our own and asking, what's left of our sacrifice that you still value?

What ideals, if any, are still powerful enough in our age that we would give our lives for them? I suspect that if there's any concept you could still persuade a man to die for today, it's liberty.

When Paris came under attack, it was freedom that felt under assault, wasn't it? And when men were sent to Iraq, just as in Flanders, it was the liberty of the people that they felt they were fighting for.

[5 : 18] But what if our understanding of freedom, that one ideal we still value, what if over time it's become so twisted and cheapened that it's no longer really freedom at all?

Could you ever imagine a world where human beings were given the offer of true freedom and they recoiled from it in horror?

I think there's a danger that we react a little bit like that as we come to this next stage in Paul's cry for liberty. Because the next mark of true freedom in his letter to the Galatians is something so alien to our understanding that we almost think of it as an opposite.

True freedom, according to Paul, means duty. Now let me suggest what I think has gone wrong in our understanding that makes us so uncomfortable with that word.

I think the problem is that we've settled for a view of humanity itself, which is mangled and distorted. We think of ourselves as entirely independent, autonomous beings.

[6 : 40] We think of ourselves really as little gods. And so freedom in our dehumanized minds means the complete unrestricted ability to serve ourselves.

But that ignores the big truth which the Bible presses home on us constantly that we are creatures. We belong to another.

And even our freedom from guilt and shame and self-serving religion, even that is only ours by the gift of our maker.

And so real freedom for a creature, a human being, is freedom to love and know him, to relate to him as a son and not a disobedient slave.

It's never independence from him. That's subhuman. Real freedom is to live dependent on him. It's to be freed to do our duty, to be what God made us to be.

[7 : 52] And so Paul forces that truth on us now in the most stark language he can. He uses the word stronger even than duty. Let me read verse 13 in a way that echoes Paul's choice of words.

He says, You are called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use that freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. That's our own selfish nature. But through love become slaves to one another.

Our Redeemer, he says, has rescued us from slavery so that we can become slaves to his ways. And that, says Paul, is true freedom.

So what does that freedom look like? What does it mean to do our duty to our Redeemer? Well, I think if we can keep this nice and simple, we learn two things in this passage.

Firstly, that duty calls us to love. And secondly, from verse 16 onwards, love calls us to war. So first, verse 13 to 15, duty calls us to love.

[9 : 08] Now, I think this is the moment in the letter where Paul looks at the church in Galatia and tells the emperor that he's got no clothes on. Remember, this is a church where there's a group of troublemakers arguing for a very different understanding of the Christian life, one that depends heavily on Jewish law to make progress in God's eyes.

And the surprising thing that Paul says now to this super religious group is that frankly, they just don't take God's law seriously enough.

You see, the whole law, verse 14, is summed up in one word, love. That's what God's always wanted from his people, isn't it? Love. And that, it turns out, is the one thing these legalists lack.

But here's why Paul does something slightly odd. If you wanted to sum up the whole law, well, there's one obvious place in the Bible to turn, isn't there?

Because when Jesus was asked what God wanted from his children, how to sum up God's law, he went straight to Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verse 5. Here's the most important of all the commandments, he says.

[10 : 26] Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might. But that isn't where Paul turns, is it?

He goes to the book of Leviticus. So the command Jesus says comes second. The whole law, verse 14, is fulfilled in one word.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Now, why does Paul do that, do you think? I think he knows, just like Jesus, that any real love for God is going to show itself in how we treat each other.

So right the way through this letter, Paul's been interested in something more than the theology of how we're forgiven, our justification. He's been interested in 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?

[11 : 41] Well, you get them to take a long, hard look in the mirror. And what they see, verse 15, is backbiting and gossip and tearing each other apart.

So much for love. I'm convinced that the ones Paul is aiming at here are precisely the same people who are so into circumcision and external holiness.

In fact, that becomes plainer and plainer over the rest of this letter. Because by focusing on rules and boundaries, we can convince ourselves that we're doing just fine.

And that's how we make opportunities for the flesh, isn't it? And so verse 15 is the killer verdict on the religious man's solution to 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.

[12 : 48] As an answer to our sinful desires, it is completely and utterly useless. So you see, it's not Paul who doesn't care about God's law.

In fact, he is seriously interested in it. Just not as a cold, self-serving way to win God's respect. Our Westminster Shorter Catechism asks a very helpful question, one that every forgiven human needs to ask, what is the duty that God requires of man?

And the answer it gives is obedience to his revealed will. Well, that's a good, clear answer 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 why God has rescued us. The whole purpose of our freedom is to be made into lovers, into a holy people who fulfill God's wonderful law.

[14 : 10] 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 within ourselves? Well, no.

Love, as Paul is using it, is something much more than a feeling, an emotion. In fact, there's a very definite shape to it.

Verse 13 is actually quite specific. Through the love, he says, through the love, serve one another. And when you look at the picture Paul paints of that love over the next few paragraphs, it becomes very obvious what he's talking about.

It's Jesus, self-giving love at work within us, urging us to say no to ourselves, not to be served, but to serve each other just like him.

We don't love by trying to conjure up emotions. We love when Jesus' spirit takes hold of our hearts and calls us to sacrifice our selfish behaviors.

[15 : 24] And so that's what Paul urges us. In fact, it surrounds the whole section like bookends from verse 16 at the start to verse 25 at the end. Keep walking, he says, in step with Christ's spirit.

It's the only answer, verse 16, the only real solution to the desires of our flesh. Not loveless religion, but the spirit of Christ.

And if that sounds like an easy answer, let me warn you that these next verses make some pretty difficult reading. Because if duty calls us to love, then the warning of verses 16 to 25 is that love calls us to war.

You see, the moment that Christ's spirit takes possession of us, a great battle begins. 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 those things which feed and gratify me.

[16 : 42] But the spirit in us craves those Christ-like qualities which selflessly serve others, fulfilling that law of love.

And so a battle commences between two implacably opposed forces, a battle that won't let up, verse 17, until one of them is dead.

But the key piece of intelligence 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 match, however hard it feels.

Since you're led by the spirit, he says, you are 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.

[17 : 45] The law is no longer the thing you enslave yourself to in your only hopeless, graceless solution to sin. The law here stands for that flesh-driven, twisted understanding of the Christian life.

If you trust Christ though, he says, there's a far greater power at work within you, even if from our 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 struggles. It doesn't make them go away.

the reality is we just feel the battle more acutely. And so let me draw your attention to what I think might be the most uncomfortable words of the New Testament.

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

[18 : 54] All those behaviors we cover up with our religion, those things we like to think we've hidden pretty well, the truth is they are perfectly plain to see.

Isn't that an uncomfortable thought? but there's a reason Paul wants to make his readers squirm a little here. He doesn't just want them to look inside their own hearts.

He wants them to look around the church at the people they listen to and ask, where does their teaching lead? Because it should be perfectly evident, according to Paul, which group is relying on their own goodness and religious efforts to impress God.

The things which these works of the flesh have in common, verse 19, is that they're all me-centered. That the things which are flesh, let us get away with when it's our flesh we trust in.

Selfish sexual appetites, verse 19, self-serving religious superstition, idolatry and sorcery, trying to manipulate God into serving us.

[20 : 12] Selfish relational attitudes, envy, anger, 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 in our hearts, then we surely don't know ourselves very well.

Because my flesh is more than capable of all of it. every day, it cries out, me, not Christ. So if it's the flesh, that flesh, that we're still counting on to make us something, our own religion, our own church attendance, our law keeping, well, the outcome is not going to look pretty.

I think Paul is still saying this is where legalism gets you. Look around the church and it will be plain as day. Who's pushing that sort of gospel?

But look at Christ's spirit. The spirit produces precious, wholesome fruit, qualities in us which delight and cherish each other.

[21 : 33] They're all relational things, aren't they? These fruits, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. Don't you long for those things, you Christians?

Every single time I lose my temper with the children or thoughtlessly upset somebody at church, something in me deep down aches to have dealt with it more like this.

Isn't that true for all of us? And that is Christ in us, longing for us to live his law of love, to be like him.

And friends, that longing painful though it is, is the most reassuring experience a Christian can ever know in this world.

Because it's our grief and frustration which tell us that Jesus' spirit is at work. There's nothing at all in Paul's understanding of the Christian life that suggests a person who's arrived.

[22 : 44] The thing like that is a mark of the religious lot. 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's the way his spirit pulls us, his way to decisively nail our old natures to his cross.

We did it once 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 to serve others in love.

The duty God asks of us in response to his grace is love. That love in Christ's spirit calls us to war and war, verse 24, calls us to die.

death. It's not a quick death and it's not an easy death, but that life of loving and dying is true freedom, according to the Bible at least.

[24 : 04] I wonder if it sounds like it to you. 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 at the age of 82, the front cover of a magazine called The Briefing simply read this, John Chapman, the first 82 years were the hardest.

Now if I've ever seen an obituary worth dying for, surely that's it. It's the testimony of a good and faithful servant, isn't it?

Not someone who thought he had it all sorted, but a man who persevered humbly through weakness and temptation and the strength of God's spirit.

He said there's nothing remotely Christian about perfectionism. In fact, it's if there's no sign of a struggle in you that you need to be worried. So to every single weary, 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 Jesus' spirit who says, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.

[25 : 34] Because that's why Christ gave you your freedom. Let's pray. Father, these words we've read force me and I'm sure every one of us here to give you thanks and to ask for your forgiveness and your help.

We give you thanks because of what you freed us from through the cross of your son. You freed us from the inability in our own flesh to achieve anything good.

You freed us from the condemnation and hatred that our flesh deserves. And you freed us to live new lives in your spirit with the power to say no to ourselves and to please you.

you. We ask for forgiveness because of what you've shown us still lurks in our hearts. Because our lack of love for each other speaks of our lack of love for you.

Because our gossiping and pride and coldness to each other shows that we're cold to your law and your spirit. And so we ask for your help, Father.

[26 : 58] We ask that you would mend our attitude to how we change. Help us not to rely on rules and resolutions which only let us get away with more.

But instead help us to submit day by day to the spirit of your son. We ask it all in the name of Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us.

Amen.