

GALATIANS - SERMON 23
GALATIANS 5:13-15 — ABUSING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY
Pastor Max Doner, Sovereign Grace Bible Church Lebanon, Oregon
24 May 1998

INTRODUCTION:

Read Galatians 5:13-15

Having combated the false doctrinal teaching of the Judaizers, doctrinally, Paul now turns to deal with the practical out-workings or fall out of the false teaching ingested. Bad doctrine always leads to bad behavior. [Heterodoxy produces heteropraxy.] Paul mentions that one of the effects of the false doctrine among the Galatians was that they were now biting and devouring one another (vs 15). In verse 26 he states that they were now full of vain-glory (conceited). This is why we must soundly reject those who state that sound doctrine or doctrinal instruction is divisive. Such men encourage the subordination of doctrinal soundness and instruction for the sake of, what they call, unity. The truth is that in reality perverted and false doctrine is divisive. Biblical doctrine and theology generates unity and peace among true believers. Good theology leads to good and godly behavior [orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy]. It is not the presence or absence of doctrine that makes the difference in the peace and unity of a church, but rather it is the quality and truthfulness of that doctrine that makes the difference. Those who associate a greater quantity of doctrine with discord and reduced doctrinal content with unity are badly misguided.

James 3:14-17

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.

James is saying that there are two kinds of wisdom or doctrine. There is earthly, sensual, and devilish doctrine on the one hand, and there is doctrine from God on the other hand. The bad doctrine produces strife and discord while the other, which is from God, produces peace.

If what we believe is wrong then our conduct shall likewise be wrong as well. Love and unity cannot be based upon the absence of doctrine, but upon sound doctrine.

Having exhorted the Galatians to return to sound and pure doctrine, now Paul turns to practical exhortations to sound behavior based upon the sound doctrine he has urged. They are to fight against sin and not against one another.

OUTLINE:

- I THE WARNING AGAINST THE ABUSE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY, vv 13-14. (THE SERMON)
- II THE WARNING AGAINST THE ABUSE OF CHRISTIAN BROTHERS, v 15. (NEXT SERMON)

CONCLUSION:

I THE WARNING AGAINST THE ABUSE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY, vv 13-14.

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul tells them in verse 13 that their effectual call by God placed them into a state of liberty. What is this liberty into which believers are placed by the effectual calling of God?

A Christian liberty consists in, at least four things.

- 1 It is liberty from the unbearable yoke of the old covenant. Believers, by virtue of salvation and inclusion into the new covenant, have been liberated from the unbearable yoke of the old covenant. We are freed from the burden of ceremony, ritual, and the observance of the details of the old covenant.

Galatians 5:1

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage (the old covenant).

Feast days, fast days, dietary restrictions, and circumcision rites were dissolved and no longer binding upon the people of God.

- 2 It is liberty from the obligation to provide one's own righteousness before God by the keeping of the moral law in order to obtain acceptance with God.

Galatians 5:5

For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.

Righteousness by faith has released us from the bondage of being a debtor to doing the whole law (v 3). The point is that the new covenant believers were liberated from having to keep perfectly the moral law of God in order to obtain acceptance with God. The Lord Jesus Christ had perfectly kept the ten commandments and his perfect compliance had been imputed to the people of God. Believers are freed from having to generate their own righteousness with God.

- 3 It is liberty from the guilt and penalty of all sins, past, present, and future.

Galatians 3:13

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"). . .

The curse of the law was lifted and the penalty removed (Romans 8:1).

- 4 It is liberty from having the conscience bound by the commandments of men rather than to the Word of God alone. The false Judaizing teachers imposed commandments upon the believers.

Galatians 2:4-5

And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came

in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

These four aspects of Christian liberty the Judaizers had sought to take from the Galatian believers. Having laid out the case against the Judaizing attack upon Christian liberty, Paul also provides a warning against the abuse of Christian liberty.

- B Warning against the abuse of liberty. There is a human tendency to go to extremes, turning a truth into a conclusion not intended. Paul saw this possibility in the Galatians and he warns them against it. The liberty which salvation brings to us was never intended to be interpreted as permitting or encouraging the abdication of our obligation to obey the moral precepts of the law of God or to continue in the course of sin against God or man. Hence Paul's statement *do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh* (vs 13). It is a misunderstanding and mis-application of the truth to equate freedom from the curse of the law with freedom to continue in sin by disobedience.

Paul seeks to demonstrate the difference between the right use of Christian liberty and the abuse of it. The two routes that can be taken is, on the one hand the pursuit of selfish sinfulness or, on the other hand, of loving service. Paul will condemn the former and commend the latter.

- 1 The course of action condemned.

The condemned course is that of using the liberty we have as an occasion to the flesh. The *flesh* is a reference to the depraved inclinations that remain in the Christian even though saved. Liberty is not to be used for an occasion to sin. The twisting of this doctrine states that freedom from sin is equivalent to freedom to sin. The truth is then used as an excuse for sinning, wrongly so.

Romans 6:1-2

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

That this is a problem within the church of God is evident in Jude's epistle.

Jude 1:4-8, 11-13

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ (by denying personal holiness). But I want to remind you, though you once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire. Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries.

. . . *Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.*

2 Peter 2:18-22

For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

Any application of the doctrine of Christian liberty that leads a Christian into the practice of sin is a false application of that doctrine. Though we are freed from the curse of the law by Jesus Christ, we have not been freed from the obligation of obeying the law. The gospel lays us under the strongest obligation, as Christians with liberty and grace, to resist sin and to avoid it.

- 2 The course of action commended. Having declared how we are not to use our Christian liberty, Paul then describes how we are to use our liberty . . . *through love serve one another.*

The proper use of our God-given liberty is to use it in order to serve others. We have not been given liberty in order to indulge in selfishness, but rather to indulge in service.

True Christian liberty inspires us to serve our fellow believers. The example we have is the Lord Jesus Christ washing the feet of the disciples. He used His liberty, not to demand service, but to offer service.

We can now strive to fulfill the moral law of God, the ten commandments, not out of fear of judgment or as an effort to relieve our guilt or earn personal righteousness, but rather out of grateful love and devotion to Jesus Christ and towards our fellow man. Obedience to the moral law is how we show love to our fellow man.

Galatians 5:14

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul uses the word *law* here as a reference to the ten commandments. Though set free from the Mosaic law of regulations and rituals, we are not set free from obligation to obey the moral law as set out for us in the ten commandments.

The law is *fulfilled in one word* assumes within itself that Paul expects us to fulfill that law. It is not said so that we do not have to fulfill the law.

Love is not mere sentimentality. To love someone means to keep the law of God towards them.

Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

At the outset of this passage a debt is assumed - *to love one another*. How is it that we know that the apostle is referring to the ten commandments? It is because he begins to quote them in the next verses. Paul specifically refers to the 7th, 6th, 8th, 9th, and 10th. He concludes his list *and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this*. Paul then employs the very same quotation he included in Galatians 5:14. Concluding this passage saying *love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law*. I am taught how to love my neighbor by the ten commandments. I learn to love him by encouraging his marriage (7th), preserving his life (6th), honoring his property (8th), telling him the truth (9th), and rejoicing in the blessings he receives (10th).

Clearly the law in mind is the one found in the ten commandments. This is why the moral law of God, the ten commandments, are perpetually binding upon the people of God, because in the doing of them we show love one to another (John 13:35). [To abrogate the ten commandments is to abrogate the necessity to love one another for it is by the ten commandments that we are taught how to love one another.]

Matthew 22:36-40

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

The ten commandments summarize our entire obligation to God in love. The first table of the law teaches us how to and how not to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, and mind. The second table of the law teaches how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This is the warning against the abuse of Christian liberty. Loving one's neighbor includes addressing sin. To overlook the sin is not loving. It will ultimately destroy relationships and foster the very opposite of love.