

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Verse 1

For freedom, Christ set us free. Therefore, do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

3:23 and 4:21 indicates that Paul has in mind a **slavery** to the law (4:7,31), which the gentile Galatians were submitting to, especially to circumcision (5:2). However, he extends this slavery to following pagan gods, for the worship of idols also involved rituals, festivals, special devotions and mystical acts required by the devotee under its laws (4:8,10). Thus, he points them to freedom: **for freedom, Christ set us free**. He does not mean the liberty that is an excuse for libertine behaviour. He means the redemption of Christ, which brings justification by faith and a status through baptism of being children of God (3:24,26). Rules, traditions, special days and ritual actions comprise religion, religion in its true sense: human attempts to obtain perfection, a higher state of being.

Verses 13-15

For you were called to freedom, brothers; only do not use freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but through love, keep on serving one another. For the whole law has been summed up in one word in this way: love your neighbour as yourself. But if you bite and eat one another, see to it that you may not be consumed by one another.

The Galatians **were called to freedom**, the call εκλήθετε of the gospel preached to them, the word from which we derive church. **Freedom** from being under the law, both its condemnation of the futile means by which people sought to be justified, was not a pretext for **an opportunity of the flesh**. The desires of the flesh are to be curbed so that a selfish, indulgent and destructive life are curbed and **the love** of God reigns in the Christian for the sake of **serving one another**. This brings to mind Luther's great treatise 'On the Freedom of the Christian'. Redemption is debased when it becomes the **occasion** αφορμην for self-centred behaviour. Then, as Bonhoeffer said, sin and the world become the gospel, that is, 'the justification of sin and the world', grace is cheapened and God is made to bless wicked behaviour.

The telos of the gospel is the justification of the sinner, and then his complete transformation in the eschaton. However, the partial transformation is to take place on earth and its shape is characterized by **love**. Paul is right, that love for God and love for others is behind everything, as Christ said (Matt 7:12; 22:37-40). Pandering to the desires of the flesh, besides greed, immorality and perversion, and self-abuse, this pandering leads to aggression, grasping and competing against others, to the behaviour graphically described as **snake-biting** δάκνετε **and eating of one another**. A scrambling for one's own advantage is always done at the expense of others.

Verses 16-18

But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will never carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh for these are in opposition with each other so that you may not act as you please. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.

Walk by the Spirit and do not fulfill the desire of the flesh. One would expect that **desire** επιθυμίαν would be in the plural, not singular. Paul does not accept that the sinful nature, **flesh** σαρκος, comprises both good desires and evil desires. Rather, because of our basic sinfulness, our natures are inclined towards evil in all things that we think, say and do. Even in a supposedly good action, on the inside, there is pride, lack of gratitude to God and a desire to deny honour him for what he enables us to do. Therefore, the human's entire physical existence is in opposition to God (Romans 5:10).

For Christians, therefore, Paul calls on them to **walk by the Spirit** πνεύματι πειπαταίτε, which he will explain shortly. The phrase recalls Enoch walking with God (Genesis 5:24) which conveys being in relationship with God and living to please him. Those who are baptized have the Spirit of

God and of Christ in them, and a transformed life begins. Rather than being controlled by the flesh and its desire to rebel against the Lord, the Christian is infused by a new power greater than our desires. Christians are inhabited by the Spirit. God has added something to their lives and it is his presence and the power of his nature and character displayed in Christ. There are many Christians who think only of an after life. They only desire their survival. However, God wishes to change us. The goal of Christ's saving work in the gospel is to present us to God without blemish and to begin in us a gloriously new life (Ephesians 2:10). The Spirit will make us new creations and Christians will become Christ-like as they walk by the Spirit.

You are not under law. If we do not travel by the Spirit's leading, then we come under the judgement of the law, specifically the Ten Commandments. If we live by the Spirit, then there are no grounds by which the law can condemn us (Romans 6:17,18, 22)

Verses 19-21

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, unnatural vices, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, discord, jealousy, rages, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these of which I forewarn you, as already I have forewarned you that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul lists **the works of the flesh**. It is not an exhaustive list for all Christians need to do is observe others who do not know the Lord and many other evils could be added. **Immorality** involves all sexual activity outside of marriage. **Unnatural vices** is a possible meaning for ακαθαρσία, which literally means uncleanness. **Debauchery** is perverted, sensual behaviour. **Idolatry, sorcery, enmity, discord, jealousy, rages, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, drunkenness, carousing** are all clear in their meaning.

Paul uses Old Testament terminology in describing the consequences of such behaviour and life-style: **will not inherit the Kingdom of God**. Κληρονομήσουσιν has the background of the promise of God to the people of Israel that the Promised Land was his gift to them and their inheritance. Ideally, property should remain in the family for it was looked upon not only as God's gift to ex-slaves from Egypt but a person's stake in the rule of God. With the revelation of Jesus Christ, God's kingdom is now viewed as a spiritual entity over which God rules by grace and his loving presence in which our ultimate healing and salvation takes place. Ephesians 5:3-7 and elsewhere speak of the judgement of God against those who live in this way. In passing, we can note that primarily God does not damn to hell anyone who does not accept his salvation in Christ but rather he condemns human beings for sin, for attacking his standards of love and goodness.

Verses 22-26

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Now 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. Let us not become conceited, challenging one another and envying one another.

Paul now turns his attention to the positive way Christians are to live. When the Spirit dwells within, **fruit of the Spirit** is produced καρπος του νεύματος. This image is a beautiful one. When, through the free gift of justification by faith, we trees are declared good and made righteous in the sight of God, from good trees, perfect fruit will begin to grow. We bear our fruit for God, to honour him. Secondly, the Spirit has to reflect the character of God in us. Our good fruit is a gift of love and service to others, serving as a witness to Christ's powerful work to save us. Finally, the Spirit teaches us to live this way now so that we are ready to live like this forever in God's visible kingdom in glory. **Love** comes first, for God is love and we bear the image of Christ who loved us. **Joy** is a characteristic of a redeemed person who knows the Lord and experiences the wonderful way he fills our life with meaning and his presence. **Peace** is to be reconciled with God, without any fear of punishment. These first three fruit come directly from our relationship with God for the Holy Spirit is our bond to the Lord. **Patience** is the tolerance we have for others, **kindness** is seen in compassion and mercy, **goodness** is exhibited in loving

acts. The last three fruits are **faithfulness** that moves us to show loyalty to others, **gentleness** refers to mildness in our approach to others without severity, and **self-control** is to curb hasty actions that would hurt those around us though Paul may have in mind moral control.

Again Paul reminds us that to live this way could not result in us coming under the **law** and its judgement for it cannot speak **against such things**.

Paul ends this section by reminding us that we are baptized have **crucified the flesh** (sinful nature) Romans 6:6. This is a literal act of God that incorporates us in Christ by the Spirit who joins us to him and thus we undergo a crucifixion through faith. Interestingly, it is in a later section (Romans 8:2) that includes the Spirit in this work.

If we live by the Spirit ζῶμεν does not mean living in eternity but the same idea of walking by the Spirit in verse 16 (Romans 8:4). If we are daily crucifying the flesh by confession and absolution (repentance) then we will be **in line with the Spirit**. Paul considers the Spirit not as a mere energy or working of God to produce fruit but a person, a being who has personality and ought to be followed when prompted by him. **Do not be conceited, provoking and envying one another**. In a class ridden society, striving to outdo others must have been prevalent. The love of status, power and control are devastating in a Christian community. All the fruits of the Spirit bring us either an experience of the love of God or the gift of God's love for others. That is, the Spirit is essentially gracious, grace-giving. Anything that does not build us up or others is from our flesh, an existence governed by our earthly or physical appetites, which lead to evil.