

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

A1027 – July 4, 2010 – Galatians 5:13-15 – Freedom Is Not License

Question: How does the circumcision of Timothy fit with Joseph Fletcher's "situation ethics" – the end justifies the means?" Now, remember where this question is coming from. Last week we saw that Paul did not have Titus circumcised but he did have Timothy circumcised. Two different cases, two different situations; for all intents and purposes isn't Paul following Fletcher's situation ethics? A good question, let's try to answer that. Fletcher was one of the academics in the 1960's who was pushing for abortion, eugenics, euthanasia, infanticide and cloning...We can thank Fletcher for flooding our society with relative ethics applied to the value of human life. Fletcher rejected the biblical concept that human life has absolute value. And the thing that makes it even worse is the guy was an Episcopal priest, taught Christian Ethics in the University for 36 years before he veered off and rose to be a prominent humanist in the 1970's, was awarded the Humanist of the Year in 1974. So that's the kind of people the Episcopal Seminary was producing 50 years ago. Underlying Fletcher's relative value of human life was his rejection of the Bible as the source of values and ethics. Fletcher said values and ethics come out of society, out of man, that man creates values and ethics and once that's your ultimate presupposition you can't find any absolutes. Everything is determined by the situation at hand, the circumstances. That's what Fletcher believed. Now is Paul, by having Timothy circumcised in Acts 16 engaging in Fletcher's "situation ethics?"

This is a question that's been around for quite some time. And it's the missionaries that deal with it the most. One of the principles in missions that is well-recognized by those involved first-hand in the field is called "contextualization." Contextualization deals with the question, "If I am a missionary and go into a foreign culture what kind of concessions can I make for the sake of the gospel?" Can I eat their food? Can I wear their clothing?

Can I speak my native language? Those kinds of questions. Now Paul was traversing through a number of sub-cultures in the Roman Empire on his missionary journeys and he made a number of concessions to reach people with the gospel. It's these concessions that cause theologians to jump on Paul. Oh Paul, you screwed up, you violated grace, you were wrong to do that. Now, was Paul wrong to do that? We better be careful, especially when the Scriptures don't attack Paul for the concessions he makes. So to answer that, we have to get our principles of contextualization from the Scriptures and one of the key Scriptures is 1 Cor 9:20, turn there. Everybody involved in the question has to deal with 1 Cor 9:20. Verse 20, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; ²¹to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. ²³*I do all things* for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it." The problem there is, "What do you mean Paul by "all things?" Do you mean to say you will violate doctrinal principles to win people to Christ? Let's think that through. If I reject a biblical doctrine for the sake of the gospel what have I accepted? I haven't become neutral. I've accepted pagan doctrine. Now how am I going to reach anyone for Christ if I am advocating pagan doctrine? I can't win them to Christ; they've won me to paganism. So you can't blaze through 1 Cor 9 and conclude that Paul would reject biblical doctrine for the sake of the gospel. That would undermine the gospel. So the line in the sand is biblical doctrine. You can't reject biblical doctrine. But isn't Paul, by having Timothy circumcised, rejecting the doctrine of justification by faith alone? Answer no, because Paul is not having Timothy circumcised so he can be justified. He's having Timothy circumcised so he can evangelize Jews freely. Now, it would be wrong if Paul was having him circumcised so he could be justified. But he's not doing that. The text of Acts 16 is very clear. The issue is that Timothy is a block to Jewish evangelism in that region because his father was known to be a Greek. So what did Paul do? He had Timothy circumcised. Now he's not longer a block, he can move freely among Jews and Greeks. There's no doctrine that says we can't do that. There's no doctrine that says you can't have your baby boy circumcised. Lots of parents have had that minor surgery done on their boys simply because of the medical benefits. The medical community used to say

there was a positive medical benefit in that the women that married circumcised men had less cervical cancer than those who did not. That's come into question in recent medical literature. But the point is there's nothing sinful about doing that. And there was nothing sinful with Paul having Timothy circumcised. That's not situation ethics in the Joseph Fletcher sense. Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised was simply because of the advantage in the spread of the gospel. Paul was the great champion of salvation by grace through faith alone in Christ alone apart from circumcision, apart from the Law. But that did not mean that a believer does not have the freedom to be circumcised or follow the Law, understanding that it has no role whatsoever in justification or sanctification. It was purely for cultural reasons to spread the gospel. And so Paul was not wrong, Paul was right. You have to realize under this principle of contextualization, that in the missionary world there are certain cultural concessions that can be made. There is no reason to go in there and make circumcision an issue. Circumcision is neither here nor there. That's what Paul says in Gal 5:6. What's the issue? The real issue is the underlying motive for getting circumcised. And it's the same with food or dress or language, if these cause a block to the gospel, get them out of the way, they're unimportant. But doctrine, you cannot concede that. And Paul didn't do that.

Today in Gal 5:13-15 we handle the other side of legalism which is licentiousness. There are two sides to the flesh and everyone tends toward one side or the other. Lest we get the wrong idea of what Paul is attacking by going on and on about the dangers of legalism, he sticks a note in here about the dangers of licentiousness. Believers have the tendency, if you harp on one thing forever - don't be a legalist, don't be a legalist - that they'll swing so far to the other side that they'll commit the equally opposite and wrong error of licentiousness, the mentality that I'm saved by grace and now I can do whatever I want. I can sin, sin, sin and it's all grace. Now that's what Paul attacks in Gal 5:13-15. Sin is not grace, sin is sin and it's absolutely contrary to the character of God, it's absolutely contrary to who you are in Christ. So today we talk about the other side of the flesh. The flesh can tend in two directions, both sinful, legalism or licentiousness. Now all people, Christian and non-Christian have the flesh. We get the flesh, not when we commit our first conscious sin, but when we are conceived. David said, I was conceived in sin, and that's referring to the flesh or the sin nature. So we get it at conception. The Lord Jesus avoided it by the virgin conception, but we

weren't conceived that way so we are conceived with the flesh or the sin nature. We inherit it from our father who inherited it from his father all the way back to Adam. So simply being born into this world we have inherent sin or the flesh.

Now let's define the flesh or sin nature. Some people equivocate the two, others don't. I think that sin dwells in the flesh. That's an expression from Rom 7:18 so I don't think it's possible to disagree with that, sin dwells in the flesh. Now the word used for flesh in Scripture is *sarx*, s-a-r-x and it can mean the physical flesh or it can have a negative spiritual meaning. Ryrie and Walvoord say it's the capacity to sin, Chafer says its inborn sin; others say it's an inclination, tendency or disposition to sin. Those are all fine; I say sin dwells in the flesh. The bottom line is that we all have one and it produces sin, it's a source of sin, whether we're a believer or an unbeliever. The difference between the believer and the unbeliever is not in the possession of the flesh but in the possession of the Spirit. It's the possession of the Spirit that enables us to overcome sin so it's critical, upcoming in Gal 5, to understand the two different ways believers have of walking or living; either by means of the Spirit or by means of the flesh. Unbelievers can only walk by the flesh so all they can produce is sin; all they produce is sin, mowing the yard is sinful for an unbeliever. But the believer has the option of living by the Spirit. However, today Paul's focus is on the flesh.

The flesh only produces sin but it produces sin in two directions; legalism and licentiousness. There's a tendency to oscillate between these two, and you'll see it in your own life, you'll see it in other's lives, you'll see it in family life, you'll see it in nations down through history. Let's define these terms in a compare and contrast. Licentiousness puts an overemphasis on grace by denying and opposing law. So it attacks the law by saying there are no standards. When it does that it automatically distorts grace and makes grace look like God is lenient toward sin. On the other hand, legalism puts an overemphasis on law by denying and opposing grace. So it attacks grace by saying I don't need grace to meet the standards of the law. Legalism appears to respect the law but in effect denies grace and winds up messing up the law because in legalism a person inevitably generates all kinds of laws that they can keep in the energy of the flesh. That's legalism. So licentiousness says I don't care what the standards are. God is lenient and I'm free to do as I please. Legalism says I generate all kinds of standards in addition to God's

standards because I'm going to get everybody to follow my program. Both views are wrong.

Now we said the flesh has this peculiar feature of oscillating or swinging back and forth, back and forth, like a pendulum between legalism and licentiousness. People who are naturally passive tend toward licentiousness, loose living. Why is that? Because they just don't care, it's easier just to let things go than try to fight it. Some people are like that, some cultures are like that. When you have a culture that has a low work ethic, you have a lazy society, nobody wants to work, everyone just wants to fool around, that's a passive culture and you find a lot of licentious living in passive cultures. It's just easier. The problem is that after awhile life becomes chaotic, everything starts to fall to pieces and there's wreckage all over the place. The more aggressive people in society start to crave order, they're tired of the wreckage and they want law and order and so these people lead the society in a swing toward legalism and they start making laws. This is going to be great because everybody is going to conform to the new standards and we're going to have law and order and stability in life and we're going to actually get something done. But then after awhile you're tired of making laws, you're frustrated because you can't make everyone conform and you need a release from all the order so you swing back to licentiousness and it's just this back and forth procedure. That's the flesh. It can never settle down, it just swings back and forth.

Now Paul has obviously warned a lot against legalism but today in verse 13 he warns against licentiousness. **For you were called to freedom brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh...**right there is the warning against licentiousness. So whatever freedom means it doesn't mean freedom in the autonomous sense, that we are our own law; that we do whatever we want to do and God signs off on it. In fact, what does the rest of the verse say? **Through love serve one another.** So we've been freed, not to sin, but freed to serve one another. This is the kind of freedom Paul is talking about. Before we were slaves to sin, now we're freed to serve one another, freed to righteousness. Now it may bother you that that's a commandment, through love serve one another - serve is the verb, serve is the imperative. Paul's been saying we're not under the law, then he gives us a law. Then, in verse 14 what does he do? He quotes from the OT to back up the law. Where's the quote from? Check your margin if you

have a concordance. Lev 19:18. What's Leviticus? It's part of the Law. I thought Paul said we weren't under the Law.

Well, let me explain. What we're talking about now is the means of sanctification. And the means of sanctification is both law and grace. Here's a law right here, through love serve one another. Is that a command? Yes. Are commands standards that can be obeyed or disobeyed? Yes. So that's a law. But let me explain that there are three meanings of the word "law" in the NT. The word 'law' can refer generally to all revelation in all the Scriptures and in that sense it's just a synonym for the word of God. A second meaning is "it can refer to the first five books of the Bible," it's used like that in the Gospels and in Galatians. Or third, it can refer to the Mosaic Law in particular, the 613 laws of Moses, that's the primary use in Galatians. But there are at least these three meanings of the word "law." In the NT when it says we're not under the law, its meaning number three. We're not under the Mosaic Law. But obviously we're under meaning number one, we're under the word of God still. We have the law of Christ, Gal 6:2. So that's what we mean here. Law in the larger sense is always there, God always specifies imperatives, commands, dos and don'ts and the NT has hundreds of these addressed to us. Several people have done a count, it's somewhere in the order of over 1,000 commands. We do have a standard to live by.

But what's the other side? If we have standards to live by but all we have is the flesh will we ever meet the standards? No, the flesh will either negate the laws and go licentious or generate laws and go legalistic. But the flesh can never reach the actual standard and that's why it resorts to licentiousness or legalism. So the other side of the means of sanctification is grace. What is grace in this context? Grace is enablement to meet the standard. Since we can't meet it in our flesh God supplies the grace necessary so we can meet it. And that grace is the person and work of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the word of God, a walk by the Spirit. So both law and grace are required in sanctification. It's not one or the other. People get screwed up on this very easily, they go all the way to law and become legalistic or they go all the way to grace and become licentious. The Scriptures say no, law and grace form a balance. Both are involved but it's grace that precedes law, then the law comes but its demands can't be met without grace.

So Paul is not saying in vv 13-14 you are under the Mosaic Law, he is saying if you are under any law whatsoever it's the law of serving one another, this is the summary of the whole law. What's wrong with serving one another in a loving way? How could that enslave anyone? That doesn't enslave, that frees. We've been freed to lovingly serve one another.

Now let's talk about lovingly serving one another. First, what is love? The command here is to serve but we want to understand love. True love is a mental attitude, it is not an emotion. There is an emotional love but that is not what the Scriptures are talking about and we ought not to base any decisions we make in life upon emotion. Its focus is on what is best for its object. If I love you I want what is best for you, in God's eyes, not what I think is best for you, but what God thinks is best for you.

Second the verb here is to serve, serve one another; the word means to be in total service to another. Are we doing that? Here at Fredericksburg Bible Church are we doing that? Are we in total service one to another. If we are that's a testimony, if we're not that's a different kind of testimony. One way or the other we're a testimony of something. But basically what Paul is saying in vv 13-14 is that the whole Christian life is summed up in loving one another as we defined, loving what is best for one another. If I love you I want what is best for you and the way I do that is by teaching you God's word straight. That's not what I think is best for you, that's what God thinks is best for you. That's why I do what I do the way I do it. I always think of that conversation Jesus had with Peter: three times the Lord asked Peter, do you love me? And three times Peter said, yes Lord, I love you, (different word for love), but three times the Lord said, feed my sheep. And so if I love the Lord I'll do what the Lord said and feed you the word of God. That's one way to serve; there are all kinds of ways to serve one another, that's just one example. You can serve by taking care of someone, calling them, visiting them, encouraging them in the faith, but basically that's what we're here for, to serve one another.

Now that's the law, that's part of the law of Christ, it's a standard, but it can only be met by God's enablement. You can't do that in your flesh. Oh, you can put on a good front and trick everybody, oh, so and so's a great Christian. Yeah, well, you're not fooling God, He knows very well what you're up to, and

it's going to fall through. But God has provided help. God has given us the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit.

Let's talk about the Holy Spirit and His relationship to the word of God. These two are linked. He doesn't work apart from the word of God. It's your responsibility to study the word of God. God the Holy Spirit is a gentleman and He does not override the believer's responsibility to take in the word of God. I get believers saying to me occasionally that the Holy Spirit is just going to do it. No, the Holy Spirit is not just going to do it. It's your responsibility to study the word. The Holy Spirit never works independent of the word of God. Yes, the Holy Spirit is the teacher of the word of God but He doesn't do that independent of your responsibility to study it. Prov 1:23, "I will pour out My Spirit on you, I will make My words known to you." Always the word of God and the Spirit of God go together. Now as you study the word of God, the Holy Spirit does teach you. What He does is go into our circuitry board, if you will, (we all have deep down a circuit board of how we're wired to think) and starts to break connections and make new proper connections. Because we're all screwed up and as we're coming under the teaching of the word He's using that to correct our thinking. Deep down in the mentality of our soul He does this work and I made an analogy from technology. There are other illustrations you can make but the point is the same. The first thing you have to do is to take in content of the word of God. Don't worry about the Holy Spirit, He's doing His work; you just worry about your responsibility of taking in the word.

Now, basically the life we're called to live, the life by the Spirit is what we call the faith-rest drill. So let's review the faith-rest drill. The faith rest drill some say has three steps. I have four steps, the first one is to recall. Recall some fragment, some story, some verse from Scripture, some promise; you've got to grab something from Scripture. Obviously the more Scripture you have under your belt the better equipped you are to recall Scripture, you've simply got more content to draw from and the more content you have to draw from the wider variety of problems in life you can deal with and get problems solved God's way. So first you have to recall.

Second in the faith-rest drill comes the connection; you've got to somehow connect the Scriptures to your situation. If you don't then you'll lose it. If the Scripture you recall has absolutely no linkage to your situation then what's

the point? So, if the first thing that comes to mind doesn't seem to connect with your situation try something else; think through the word until you get some passage, some story that is related to your situation. And, of course, the broader your arsenal of Scripture the more options you have to relate to your situation. So the second step is connect.

The third step in the faith-rest drill, and this is where I think most Christians break down, is in the rationale. I have to really see that if I reject God's word at this point then I reject every other point of God's word. I have to see that all of God's word is interconnected into a total coherent structure that reflects the rationality of My God. Is God a coherent thinker? Then the Scriptures must be a coherent revelation. And therefore I have to see that this one promise or story I'm recalling from Scripture to apply to my situation is not an isolated piece but is interconnected with every other Scripture. What does that do? What it does is strengthen my ability to trust that one piece because all the other pieces are reinforcing my trust in that one piece. But if I think of the Bible as piecemeal then it's easy to doubt one piece. It's much more difficult to doubt the entire structure of God's word. So I want to, in the third step, be able to develop the rationale for believing this promise or verse and that means I've got to be able to think through the rest of the Scripture to see how my one promise or verse fits in the whole.

The fourth step is the rest, of course. You're able to have a relaxed mental attitude in the situation despite the fact that the circumstances around you may be horrific. There may be other people involved who are going to pieces but you're able to hold it together and even bring the situation under control and help others trust or come to trust. And you're able to do this without all the information because you know the one who does have all the information; you know that God is omniscient and God is able to work it all out, so you're trusting Him and He's giving you the peace that transcends all comprehension.

So, as we follow the faith-rest drill God the Holy Spirit is the one who produces His fruit, that's basically how it comes about. It's not a magic trick. We'll be looking more at this in the coming weeks. But if you turn to verse 15, let's conclude by noting that the problem, if you start operating by the flesh rather than by faith, is that you'll just rip one another to shreds and that's what the Galatians were doing; they were biting and devouring one another.

They were apparently a very contentious group and they had some people on the side of legalism and others on the side of license and the whole church was in danger of destroying itself. They were fleshly believers. And you can get a whole group of fleshly believers together in one congregation and the whole thing can go to pieces. The testimony of the whole assembly can go to pieces over a stupid nothing - the color of the carpet, the pastor's tie, petty, petty things and that's the kind of thing that most churches destroy themselves over.

This can happen to a congregation. It has happened, it does happen. Any believer can fall from grace and operate by the flesh. Peter did it; Peter led an entire faction into legalism and he was destroying the gospel. Peter, the great Peter, was the first man to attack the gospel and he was a leader of the church, he walked with Jesus. So don't ever think you're immune from destroying the gospel, either by legalism or license. There's only one way to live and that's by faith. That's why Paul said, I no longer live but Christ lives in me, the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

[Back To The Top](#)

Copyright (c) Fredericksburg Bible Church 2010