

June 15, 2014  
Community Baptist Church  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Galatians  
643 South Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
© 2014 David J. Whitcomb

*To Ponder . . .*

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study Galatians 5:7-15.

1. Describe what was happening in Paul's picture of a race (v.1).
2. Have you ever observed the work of spiritual leaven, and, if so, how did you respond to it?
3. Why did Paul respond to the troublemakers with such a blunt and graphic reply (v.12)?
4. Explain ways in which freedom in Christ can be used as opportunities for the flesh.
5. Contrast loving your neighbor with biting your neighbor.

**FREE TO SERVE**  
**Galatians 5:7-15**

So far in our study in this letter from Paul to Christians in churches in Galatia, the argument should be obvious that all attempts to be justified before God by keeping laws is impossible. A modern word for that futile attempt is legalism. The sad reality is that the use of that word has run outside of nearly every common sense boundary. Today in many Christian circles the term "legalist" is attached, in a most negative way, to anyone who keeps any kind of rule for any particular reason. The irony is that possibly the new legalism is the demand that everyone march in lockstep with libertinism.

What is libertinism? That is pretty much the opposite of a person who is burdened down with too many laws. A libertine has concluded that because we are free in Christ, there are no rules that govern Christian conduct. Everyone is free to do whatever his or her preference allows. And anyone who would call such unbounded freedom into question is obviously a legalist. What a dilemma we find ourselves in. Which position is right? Is either position the correct path to follow?

"Someone has pictured legalism and libertinism as two parallel streams that run between heaven and earth. The stream of legalism is clear, sparkling, and pure; but its waters run so deep and furiously that no one can enter it without being drowned or smashed on the rocks of its harsh demands. The stream of libertinism, by contrast, is relatively quiet and still, and crossing it seems easy and attractive. But its waters are so contaminated with poisons and pollutants that to try to cross it is also certain death. Both streams are uncrossable and deadly, one because of impossible moral and spiritual demands, the other because of moral and spiritual filth." (John MacArthur, "Galatians," *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1987, p.145)

In this text before us this evening, Paul took up the squiggly, jello-like issue. In verses seven through eleven Paul quite bluntly upbraided the Christians for succumbing to a legalism that was best illustrated by the act of circumcision. Then before we have had time to digest the arguments of that paragraph, Paul immediately took up the other side of the issue. In verses twelve through fifteen, he went after the people who decided that it is best to keep no rules. "Since Christ has made us free (v1), why submit to any rules?" the people argued. Paul did not hesitate to refute that opinion by appealing to the law— of all things. Yep! God expects us who Christ has freed from the condemnation of the law to fulfill His law of loving our neighbor as ourselves.

God-honoring Christian living truly must be concerned about the impact our lifestyle has on other people. I realize that idea does not sit well with modern Americans who are more independent than their forefathers, who fought for freedom from British rule, ever dreamed of being. We must not succumb to attempts to force God to approve of us by keeping laws, and we must not succumb to the

temptation to abandon all rules. We call it Bible tension. It causes us to walk a straight line.

### **Free From Legalism (vv.7-12).**

The apostle clearly expressed his desire for the believers in the churches in Galatia (vv.7-10). He asked them to stop and think about who had hindered them (vv.7-9). More directly, Paul told them to stop and consider who had thrown obstacles in the race track. *You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth (v.7)?*

From the outset of the race, the Christians were running well. The race picture was a common analogy for New Testament writers. For example, Christians are running a race in sight of spectators and must lay aside hindering weights (Heb. 12:1). Only runners who compete according to the rules get the prize (1 Cor. 9:24). As runners in the race, we must hold fast to the word of life in order not to run in vain (Phil. 2:16). We must press on toward the prize of the upward calling—the reward at the end (Phil. 3:14). To that end it is good to check with spiritual leaders to be sure you are not running in vain (Gal. 2:22). And when it was all said and done, Paul could confess that he had finished the race (2 Tim. 4:7). The Christian life is well pictured as running a race.

The Christians in Galatia were in the race and they started out well. They sprinted from the starting block of the miracle of regeneration. They were pressing toward the goal of the celestial city. They were casting off the sins that interfered with their running. And then something they probably never expected happened. Someone came running from the sidelines and interfered with their race. The word translated *hinder* means to impede or detain. In a racetrack setting, the word means to cut in or to cut off a runner by getting in front of him or knocking him off the pace.

This is the kind of work Satan does. Paul knew the problem well because at one time he had desired to visit the believers in Thessalonica, but Satan hindered him (1 Thes. 2:18). He had planned to visit Christians in Rome, but Satan hindered him (Rom. 15:22). Typically, Satan accomplishes this “impeding” through individuals who are willing to serve as his accomplice. In this case, false teachers who went from Jerusalem to the churches in Galatia were knocking

runners for Jesus all over the track. Paul saw it as a disaster. We should see things like this as spiritual disaster. It is not always just a different opinion or preference. Sometimes it is teaching that conflicts with the Bible. That is never good or acceptable.

Surely the people figured it out, but just in case they didn't, Paul informed them that the obstacles in the race track didn't come from God! *This persuasion is not from him who calls you (v.9)*. There might have been some confusion in the matter because the false teachers claimed that their doctrine was rooted in the Bible (the Old Testament). That would have been arguable if Jesus had not come and paid the price for sin. Therefore, to appeal to the authority of God to enslave us to condemnation of the law when Christ has already set us free in freedom is tragic. God never tempts anyone to be enslaved to anything!

Paul warned the Christians and us to watch out for the influence of these people who place obstacles in our way. He warned that *a little leaven leavens the whole lump (v.9)*. The problem with leaven is that it doesn't seem bad in and of itself. What harm can a little leaven do? In fact, if you are baking bread, leaven is a good thing. But most of the time when the word is used symbolically in the Bible it is not good at all. So in real church life, the teaching or the sin appears quite ugly if you remove it from the person. The kind, friendly, outgoing, personable bearer of the leaven is what makes it so deadly. It is like someone who is carrying a deadly disease who hugs you and kisses you.

Consider, for example, the guy in Corinth who was having sex with his father's wife. Paul could not hide his conclusion that this sin was atrocious. He wrote, *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife (1Cor. 5:1)*. But the people seemed to really like the guy, which made them very tolerant. Therefore, they received Paul's warning, *Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump (1Cor. 5:6)?* It is like the root of bitterness that when it springs up it defiles many (Heb. 12:15). Apparently these roots are difficult to detect, which explains why God gave us the warning. But when the root bears fruit, it is destructive to the assembly.

So Paul warned about the influence of leaven, and then concluded, “You will be okay, and the one who hinders won’t.” *I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine (v.10a)*. Wait a minute. Was Paul saying, “You’ll be fine when you adopt my view”? How could Paul be so sure when he was absent and the false teachers were right there? He understood that the Church belongs to Christ, and Christ is in charge of building it. He understood that people who are truly born again will grow in Christ and reject false teaching, which means that he was content that any who were part of the assemblies who were not truly born again would become victims, fall away, and that was okay.

But, why was Paul so arrogant to conclude that his view was the right one? He understood that the false teaching was not supported by a careful exegesis of Scriptural truth. He understood that God called him, gave him truth, and affirmed his authority. He was not arrogant but humbly confident.

In this confidence, Paul was convinced that the troublemaker will get his due. He assured the believers, *and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is (v.10b)*. Paul was quite sure that God would repay the troublemaker. In other places in Scripture, we learn that God repays people who interrupt Christians on the path to heaven, by punishing them even in this life. Therefore, Paul confidently turned some people over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. That is why Paul confidently turned Alexander and Hymenaeus over to God so that God would teach them not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:20). It is why Paul confidently stated that God was going to repay Alexander the coppersmith for his deeds (2 Tim. 4:14). Most Christians believe that this is a rule, practice, or confidence that is long deceased. Maybe not.

Paul desired that the Christians would get back up, continue the race, and be more alert to troublemakers who wanted to knock them off the track. That was his desire for them. The apostle’s desire for the troublemakers was a bit different (vv.11-12). First, he wanted them to stop the false accusations (v.11). Specifically, Paul stated that he was not still preaching circumcision. *But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted (v.11a)?* Apparently, someone was falsely accusing Paul of preaching circumcision. It is true that he freely acknowledged that he had been circumcised as a

child (Phil. 3:5). But that was not his choice. It is also true that Paul required Timothy to be circumcised in order not to offend Jewish Christians (Acts 16:3). Therefore, he must have preached the need for circumcision, right?

Oh, then if that was the case, Paul was a hypocrite! The troublemakers concluded that he obviously believed in and practiced circumcision. Then he had the unmitigated gall to turn around and argue against the Christians in Galatia practicing the same thing. This is precisely the way people who are influenced by Satan twist statements and practices to cause doubt about the integrity of God’s servants. If the critics can point out cracks in the leaders’ armor, then the people will abandon the leader. Satan has never rested from this scheme throughout the history of the Church. So Paul the Christ-chosen, God-ordained apostle was forced to defend himself.

The problem was that if Paul preached circumcision, the cross was no longer offensive. He said, *In that case the offense of the cross has been removed (v.11b)*. Paul’s message was always salvation through the cross of Christ. His passion was the work of Christ on the cross. He confessed, *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (1 Corinthians 1:17)*. He also confessed, *But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Galatians 6:14)*.

Therefore, Paul was greatly concerned about the false accusations. If any human work of any kind must be added to the work of Christ on the cross, the cross has been rendered powerless. The offense of the cross rests partly in the fact that it was a shameful act not only to crucify an innocent man, but to crucify God the Son. But most of the offense of the cross is its exclusivity. There is no other means of being reconciled to God—period! The offense of the cross is that this is the only way of salvation. All human works are useless. All other religions are rendered void. Don’t even ask! That conclusion is considered unkind, unfair, discriminatory, biased, bigoted, arrogant, and self-serving. Indeed, it is the offense of the cross!

To claim that a true servant of God has done something to temper the offense of the cross should make the servant’s blood boil.

Paul's did. Essentially, he asked of the troublemakers, "Why stop half way" (v.12)? *I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves (v.12)!* Paul was obviously passionate for those who were being unsettled. Yes, but does that justify this outburst? Let's think about it. Paul gave his life to win people to Christ and to ground them in Christ. His Savior and Master gave the ultimate price to win their salvation. Then to have someone tamper with that process was unacceptable.

So Paul said that if the troublemakers were so concerned about cutting skin, why didn't they castrate themselves? Did Paul lose his temper? Surely he would apologize for this later after he settled down, right? That was not likely if we understand what Paul said. The people in Galatia were very familiar with the thriving cult of the goddess Cybele. In an annual ritual honoring her and her dead consort, Attis, the men who devoted themselves to be priests of the cult would castrate themselves and serve the false religion as eunuchs. With this background in hand, Paul argued: "If you are going to undo the work of Christ on the cross by demanding the removal of flesh, why not copy the pagans who think they can be saved by castrating themselves." That knowledge led M.R. Vincent to this translation: "These people are disturbing you by insisting on circumcision. I would that they would make thorough work of it in their own case, and instead of merely amputating the foreskin, would castrate themselves as heathen priests do. Perhaps this would be even more powerful to help to salvation."

That fits well with the argument of this paragraph that we are free from legalism. Since we are free from the law, we should not try to win God's favor through works.

### **Free to Resist the Desires of the Flesh (vv.13-15).**

Because Christ has made us free, we should enjoy our freedom (v.13). In a repetition of an earlier statement, Paul stated *you were called to freedom, brothers (v.13a)*. It is a wonderful reminder from 5:1. From the study of this letter, we know that we are free from the condemnation of the law. We are free from the condemnation of sin. We are free from the restriction of human ordinances done in order to gain salvation.

Now to enjoy that freedom, we must remember that true Christ-given freedom loves the righteousness of God. We are freed because of Christ's righteousness. When God set us free, He put Christ's righteousness on our account. Therefore, a love for righteousness is one of the redeemed person's characteristics. It must be this way because Jesus taught that we will "*seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*" (Matthew 6:33). Peter reminded us that *[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24)*. Paul practiced this reality. *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you (Philippians 3:13-15)*.

Therefore, it also must stand that God does not give freedom in order to become enslaved to the flesh. *Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (v.13b)*. The *flesh* is the sinful desires that are part of human nature. If we love righteousness, we must hate the sin of the flesh. And yet the flesh will be with us as long as we are in these bodies. The desires of the flesh are made quite manifest by natural, unsaved people (even if they are religious teachers). *For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them (2 Peter 2:18-21)*.

Christ did not set us free from sin and law in order to let the natural desires of the flesh enslave us. Most modern Christians cannot even identify the desires of the flesh. They believe that if something is exciting, it must be spiritual, not realizing that the concept of *excite*

almost always refers to fleshly desire and emotions. They have come to reinterpret the 60+ references to sin, as *passee*, archaic, or old-school. The mantra of modern Christianity is, “We don’t live under those rules anymore.” So there is a whole new set of rules governing entertainment, dress, drink, language, worship, and habits for Christians. If you complain that their influence can work like leaven, their response is, “I don’t care!”

The “I don’t care” response flies in the face of God’s plan that we are to serve others (vv.13c-15). This is how God plans for His people to fulfill the law (vv.13c-14). Did we just say that we are to fulfill the law? How does that fit with the foregoing arguments? We are not doing works of law in order to be saved. We fulfill God’s law, because we are saved, by serving others through love. *But through love serve one another (v.13c)*. Genuine concern to do what is best for others is God’s standard of righteousness. John wrote, *By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:10)*. Righteousness is serving others; selfishness is serving the desires of my flesh.

Our governing law in life is righteous. Therefore, we strive to do “one word” as Paul put it. *For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v.14)*. The standard for ourselves is the very best, i.e. becoming like Christ. It begins with salvation. It continues in sanctification. To love others like that will cause us to sacrifice in their behalf. We don’t do what our conscience allows us to do. We build a relationship with others, which takes time.

While we are fulfilling the law of righteousness by loving others, we are not allowed to bite (v.15). Can church folks bite and devour each other? Must be, because Paul warned, *But if you bite and devour one another (v.15a)*. The conjunction *but* signals a contrast to the foregoing. Biting is a bad habit of some toddlers. A wise parent will do whatever he or she must do to eradicate this behavior from a child because biting children cause much pain and trouble in the nursery. And biting church members do the same! Notice how Paul used three verbs here—bite, devour, consume—that picture a vicious fight among animals.

The issue in Galatia was, no doubt, people who believed the legalistic teachers vs. those who did not. Those who wanted to live by rules vs. those who wanted no rules vs. those who sought to live by the Holy Spirit’s directing (5:16-26). A wrong response would be, “Oh well, it is just a difference of opinion, or conflicting personalities.” No, it is a matter of someone determined that his or her opinion is the only possible truth and being unwilling to grant Christian latitude to another. That is not the mark of a loving brother or sister. It is the mark of a fool. Solomon taught that *the way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult (Proverbs 12:15-16)*. He said that *a fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion (Proverbs 18:2)*. *A fool’s lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul (Proverbs 18:6-7)*. Therefore, *it is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling (Proverbs 20:3)*

People like that were knocking Christians off the track in Galatia. What should we do in such situations? Solomon gave a word to the wise: *Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words (Proverbs 23:9)*. Fools will always cause disruption and dissension in families, the work place, schools, churches, and even the halls of legislation.

If we become like them and bite and devour, it will be the end of the church. That was Paul’s warning: *watch out that you are not consumed by one another (v.15b)*. Apparently, it was an issue or Paul would not have brought it up. Plus, the very practical instruction about avoiding the sins of the flesh and pursuing the fruit of the Spirit sounds a corrective measure to such an issue. Meaning that this is something we also need to guard against.

Christ’s finished work on the cross has set us free from the condemnation of the law and sin. We need to be alert to legalists who would shame us into trying to win God’s favor by doing good works. Christ’s finished work on the cross has set us free from enslavement to the desires of the flesh. We need to be alert to libertines who tempt us into practices that turn into habits of enslavement to fleshly impulses. And when we respond to either extreme, we must rest confidently in the authority of God’s Word and not lower ourselves

to sniping, biting, and eventually devouring the church. How many churches or religious institutions have lost their testimony or ceased to exist because of such unrelenting expressions of personal opinions? The religious highway of America is absolutely littered with the carcasses of local churches that have fought to the death with themselves.