

Losing Our Grip on Grace

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. – Galatians 5:1-6 ESV

In these verses, Paul makes it clear that the rite of circumcision was one of the big issues facing the Gentile believers to whom he wrote. They were being pressured by the Judaizers into believing that their salvation was incomplete unless they agreed to be circumcised. In essence, they were being told that they needed to become Jews before they could become believers. But Paul warns them that there is not end to this slippery slope down which they are about to slide. If they give in to the demand of circumcision, then they will be required to keep the whole law. By accepting the idea that obedience to the law is necessary for their salvation, they are placing themselves back under the full weight of the law. As we saw in an earlier blog post, the apostle James made this point painfully clear: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (James 2:10 ESV).

The issue for Paul is that of freedom in Christ. He says that it is “for freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1 ESV). Most of us, when we think of our freedom in Christ, focus on our freedom from sin and death. And yet, Paul speaks of another freedom we enjoy because of our relationship with Christ. “For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:5-6 ESV). Does our release from the law mean that the law was somehow evil? Paul answers that question rather emphatically. “By no means! ...the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:7, 12 ESV). What Paul is telling his readers is that the law is no longer to be viewed as a mandatory code of conduct or as a set of rules that must be obeyed to gain a right standing with God. We have been freed from that pointless pursuit. Paul spent his lifetime preaching the believer’s newfound freedom in Christ. That freedom includes our release from having to pursue justification through adherence to the law.

*Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. **For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law.** – Galatians 2:16 NLT*

*Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. **For***

no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are. – Romans 3:19-20 NLT

So it is clear that no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.” This way of faith is very different from the way of law, which says, “It is through obeying the law that a person has life.” – Galatians 3:11-12 NLT

Paul did not want the Galatians to fall back into slavery. At one time they were slaves to sin and under the control of Satan himself. They had no other choice. But when they had accepted Christ as their Savior, they had been released from their captivity. But now they were risking falling back into slavery – slavery to the law. If they turned their backs on the grace offered through Christ and the justification that He alone could provide, they would be willingly allowing themselves to live according to their own self-reliance and their ability to keep God happy through rule-keeping. To do so would be to fall away from grace, and Paul was not willing to sit back and watch them do that. It is not that Paul believed they would run the risk of losing their salvation. That is not what falling away from grace means. He is simply saying that they will be walking away from God’s sole method of salvation and justification: His undeserved and unearned grace as offered through His Son by means of faith. In Paul’s theology, faith in God’s grace gift of His Son would result in good works and a willing adherence to His commands. In the minds of the legalists, it was the exact opposite. Man’s adherence to God’s law would earn him a right standing before God and was, if anything, as important as faith in Christ.

Paul gives us the key difference between a life that is grace-focused and one that is law-based. “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness” (Galatians 5:5 ESV). It is by the Spirit’s power that we are to live, not our own. And it is He who provides us with the faith necessary to eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. We don’t manufacture faith. It is a gift provided to us by God. It is with the Spirit’s help that we have “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). That was the author of Hebrews description of faith. God’s indwelling Spirit provides us with the supernatural ability to believe in things that have not yet happened and to trust in those things we can’t even see. It is by faith that we believe we will be sanctified by God. We can’t see the end result. We can’t even see our sanctification taking place in real time. But we believe that God is doing what He has promised to do. Paul wanted believers to have a certainty and an abiding assurance that God had not only saved them by faith, but He was busy perfecting them by faith. And one day He was going to finish what He began by glorifying them by faith. “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6 NLT).

God doesn’t need our help to make us holy. He simply asks for our complete reliance upon Him and our willing obedience to what He calls us to do, even when it doesn’t make sense.

No Other Gospel

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! – Galatians 5:7-12 ESV

Paul took this issue very seriously. As far as he was concerned, it had little to do with the rite of circumcision itself, but it had everything to do with the integrity of the gospel. God had sent His Son as the one and only means for mankind's salvation. His sacrificial death on the cross was God's sole solution to man's sin problem. The law was never intended by God to save men, but to condemn them of their sins. The law revealed the holiness and righteousness that God demanded in a non-negotiable, hand-written form. It left no grey areas or anything up to man's imagination. But man, in his sinful condition, was totally incapable of keeping the law. And this was no surprise to God. He had intended all along to send His Son in human form, in order that He might keep the law and become the sinless substitute and unblemished sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, died on behalf of sinful men, and His death provided the only means by which men might be restored to a right relationship with God. Paul wrote to the Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Romans 3:23-25 ESV).

Anything and anyone that interfered with that message was considered an enemy by Paul. He didn't suffer false teachers lightly. He would not tolerate those who preached a different version of God's gospel. That is why he started out this letter to the Galatians with very strong words concerning those who were amending the gospel of God.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. – Galatians 1:6-9 ESV

In today's passage, Paul commends his readers for running the race well, but then accuses them of allowing others to knock them off course. They had accepted Christ by faith and were living the Christian life in faith, but then had run into an obstacle along the way. The Greek word Paul used was ἀνακόπτω (*anakoptō*) and it refers to something having its progress hindered, held back or checked in some way. The Judaizers, who were demanding that the Gentile converts in Galatia be circumcised, were actually hindering them from obeying the truth as found in the

gospel. They were adding unnecessary requirements. And Paul made it clear that his new rules were not from God. “This persuasion is not from him who calls you” (Galatians 5:8 ESV). And the real danger of this kind of teaching was that it would soon permeate every aspect of their faith, causing them to walk away from the grace offered by God and back into the legalism of the law. Which is what Paul seems to be saying when he writes, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” This kind of false teaching would become like an uncontrolled cancer spreading through the church in Galatia and robbing them of the freedom they had found in Christ.

But Paul expressed his confidence that the Galatian believers would reject this false teaching and remain faithful to the life of faith. And he assured them that, regardless of what others might have said, he was not a proponent of circumcision. Yes, he had encouraged Timothy to be circumcised, but that was a different case altogether. Timothy, a young disciple of Paul’s, had a Jewish mother who had become a believer, but his father was Greek. In the book of Acts we read, “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3 ESV). It had nothing to do with Timothy’s salvation, but with his ministry to the Jews. Paul knew that they would never listen to an uncircumcised Gentile, so he encouraged Timothy to undergo circumcision to make him acceptable to the Jews and provide him a platform to share the gospel with them.

Evidently, the false teachers in Galatia had been saying that Paul was also a proponent of circumcision, most likely using the story of Timothy as evidence. But Paul denies that charge and asks why he is still being persecuted by the Judaizers if they are all on the same page. No, Paul was adamantly opposed to these men, and he made his position clear. For Paul, the very nature of the cross was an offense to the legalists. Jesus’ death had removed any vestige of self-righteousness or the possibility of justification by works. The cross symbolized Jesus’ once-for-all-time payment for the sins of mankind. Nothing more was necessary. But for the legalists, this party of the circumcision, the cross was not enough. So, Paul had some harsh words for them. He compared them the pagan priests who practiced ritual castration as part of their worship, and he wished that they would do the same to themselves. Paul was not necessarily wishing physical harm on these individuals but was really expressing his desire that they be cut off from the local fellowship of believers. He saw them as a real danger to the spiritual health of the church. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul had similarly harsh words regarding these men”

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. – Philippians 3:2-3 ESV

In our desire to be tolerant, we sometimes run the risk of allowing dangerously false doctrines to infiltrate the church. But when it came to the doctrine of salvation, Paul was anything but tolerant. He would not accept alternative views. He would not abide by those who offered a different gospel. For Paul, there was only one means of salvation, and it was by faith alone in Christ alone. And if anyone preached a different gospel, Paul called them out. And we should do

the same. It is NOT true that all roads lead to the top of the mountain. It is false to believe that there are other ways for men to be made right with God. Jesus Himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 ESV).

Bad Fruit

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 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 are 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 desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for 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, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. – Galatians 5:13-21 ESV

One of the accusations the party of the circumcision leveled against Paul and his message of grace and freedom from the law was that it produced license. They most certainly used the teachings of Paul against him at this point. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20 ESV). And yet, Paul went on to say, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2 ESV). Grace was not a license to sin. The freedom it provided from the Mosaic law was not a ticket to live as we pleased. It freed us from having to keep the law *in order to* earn favor with God. The law held us captive to our sin and in bondage to our own weakness to do anything about it. But the salvation offered in Christ set us free. It was William Barclay who wrote, “the Christian is not the man who has become free to sin, but the man, who, by the grace of God, has become free *not to sin.*”

That is why Paul warned his readers to not use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Their new-found freedom from having to keep the law did not mean they were free from having to live in keeping with the law. At one point in His ministry, Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment of God was. He responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40 ESV). Paul used these very words of Jesus to admonish his readers. Loving God meant living according to His holy will. Loving others required loving them selflessly and sacrificially, which is why Paul said, “through love serve one another.”

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul provided an entire chapter on the subject of love. In it he wrote, “If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, ‘Jump,’ and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I

believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love" (1 Corinthians 13:1-7 MSG).

But this kind of love is only possible with the help of the Holy Spirit. Without His help and our reliance upon His power, we will tend to live in the power of our own sinful flesh. We will become selfish and self-centered. We will tend to gratify the desires of our old nature, which Paul describes with painful accuracy. These fleshly desires are the exact opposite of what the Spirit wants to produce in us. They are counter to the will of God and reflect a love for self more than a love for Him. They most certainly don't model a love for others. Look at Paul's list: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, and wild parties. Each of these "works of the flesh" reveal a disdain for God and a dislike for those around us.

The moral, ceremonial and civil sections of the Mosaic law were designed to regulate the lives of the people of Israel regarding their relationships with God and with one another. But Jesus said that all of the commandments could be summed up by two simple commands: Love God and love others. Loving God meant not loving other gods. Loving others meant not becoming jealous of them, getting angry with them, lusting after them, or taking advantage of them. Notice that his list has more to do with our relationships with one another than our relationship with God. There is a reason for this. The apostle John wrote, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20 ESV). The greatest expression of our love for God is to be found in our love for those whom He has made. When we love one another, we are loving God. When we live selflessly and sacrificially, we are exemplifying the very character of God. When our lives are marked by self-control and a focus on the needs of others, we reflect the nature of God. But all these things are only possible when we live according to the power of God's indwelling Spirit.

A life continually characterized by the works of the flesh is a life devoid of the Spirit of God. Those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ have received the Spirit of God. They are no longer slaves to sin, incapable of living righteous lives. They have been given the Holy Spirit and have the power to love God and love others. That's why Paul told the Romans, "But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all)" (Romans 8:9 NLT). The presence of the Spirit within us does not guarantee that we will live sinless lives, but it does mean that we don't have to live sin-dominated lives. Living according to our own sinful flesh will always produce bad fruit. But living according to the Spirit of God produces good fruit that pleases God and blesses others.

Good Fruit

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another. – Galatians 5:22-26 ESV

When we live according to or under the control of the Holy Spirit, we don't have to worry about producing the works of the flesh. His power can only produce good fruit, those characteristics and manifestations that align with God's will and reflect godliness. Living dependent upon and in obedience to the Holy Spirit never results in legalism and license, the two dangers facing the believers in Galatia. And yet, like them, we can find it so easy to live according to our own sinful nature and end up trying to work our way into God's good graces or taking advantage of His grace by living in sin and expecting Him to simply forgive and forget.

When we live according to our sinful nature, the outcome is always *destructive*, not *constructive*. Driven by selfishness and pride, we make ourselves the highest priority and end up using and at times, abusing others. We tend view others as competition. We struggle with envy and jealousy, anger and distrust. People become tools to get what we want and to satisfy our own self-centered agendas. Our sinful flesh has no love for God or others. It only loves self. Unknowingly, we become our own god, expecting the world to revolve around our wants, needs and desires.

But when we live in willful submission to the Spirit of God, we find ourselves with a supernatural capacity to live in love with God and in harmony with others. We suddenly want what He wants. We see others as more important than ourselves. We look for opportunities to extend grace and express love. The fruit produced in our lives becomes other-oriented instead of self-centered. It becomes uplifting and edifying, meeting the needs of others rather than feeding the insatiable appetite of self. What the Holy Spirit produces in us and through us is fully pleasing to God and there is no law prohibiting its presence in our lives. Yet the works of the flesh, the bad fruit our sin nature produces, are all in contradiction to the will of God and are specifically prohibited by the law of God. When we live in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are free from the law, because our lives produce fruit that is free from condemnation. Paul elaborated on this very thought in his letter to the Romans:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. – Romans 8:1-4 ESV

Paul encouraged the Galatians to live by the Spirit – to live under His control. They could either live according to, under the influence of, their old sin nature or the Spirit. And he wanted them to remember that those “who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there” (Galatians 5:24 ESV). Those sinful passions and desires, while not gone, no longer control us. We have an alternative resource – the Holy Spirit. Again, Paul told the Romans, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:5-6 ESV). If we try to live according to the law, we are depending upon the flesh again. If we assume that we can practice license, doing whatever we want, because we are guaranteed eternal life, then we are allowing the flesh to control our lives. And the result of both legalism and license is death. Our lives will be characterized by rotten fruit that does no one any good. But if we set our mind on the Spirit and His will for us, our lives will be characterized by life and peace, fruitfulness and selflessness, and a love for God that finds expression in our love for others.

Paul gives the Galatians an important insight into living according to the Spirit. “Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in **every part of our lives**” (Galatians 5:25 ESV). No compartmentalization. No hidden areas. The Holy Spirit wants to influence and infiltrate every area of our lives. He wants to control every aspect of our character, eliminating the vestiges of our old nature and replacing it with the nature of Christ. And it will show up in the form of fruit that is God-produced and edifying to everyone around us: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do – He has provided a way for sinful men and women to live lives characterized the fruit of righteousness. His Spirit within us is the key to seeing His righteousness flow out of us. The Spirit of God is the means by which we live as children of God.

We Don't Grow Alone

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load. – Galatians 6:1-5 ESV

The two extremes of legalism and license both tend to encourage lifestyles of self-centeredness and selfishness. Law-keeping becomes a competition, where we compare our “spirituality” with others. The measure of our worthiness becomes a somewhat subjective determination based on our success compared to that of others. A lifestyle of license is inherently self-absorbed, where the individual's wants and desires come first, and others become tools or pawns to get what you want. Legalism and license are both flesh-based and produce harmful and hateful outcomes.

Yet Paul wants his readers to know that a life based on the power of the indwelling Spirit of God is something different altogether. It produces fruit that is beneficial to all those around us. It is anything but self-centered and self-absorbed. An apple tree does not produce fruit for itself. It is for the benefit of others. And in the same way, the Christian's life is to be lived selflessly, focused on meeting the needs of those around them, including other believers as well as the lost. And Paul provides a practical, everyday life example. He describes a situation where a fellow believer is overcome by some sin. The word Paul used to describe this individual's situation refers to someone being overtaken or surprised by sin. It would be like a slower runner suddenly being overtaken or caught by a much faster runner. The idea is of a believer's sin suddenly catching up with him. He didn't see it coming. Rather than being premeditated and planned, it caught him completely by surprise. This is not describing someone dealing with an ongoing, unrepentant sin issue, but an individual who suddenly and unexpectedly sins. In a case like that, we are to “restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” There is a humility and tenderness that must accompany our confrontation. Pride has no place in a situation like this. Exposing the other believer's failure should produce no joy or create any sense of self-satisfaction in us. We are not the holier Christian confronting the less-spiritual brother in Christ. When Paul says, “you who are spiritual,” he is simply referring to someone who has the Spirit living within them. The Greek word he uses is πνευματικός (*pneumatikos*) and it refers to “one who is filled with and governed by the Spirit of God” (“G4152 – *pneumatikos* – Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible).

Those who are living according to the Holy Spirit within them will naturally care about those around them. They will have a supernatural sensitivity to the spiritual condition of their fellow believers and a Spirit-led desire to get involved in their lives. If we see a fellow believer suddenly caught up in sin, we are to lovingly lead them back on to the right path. The confrontation is to be done lovingly and constructively. The goal is repentance and restoration.

But Paul warns us to be cautious and careful, “lest you too be tempted.” This is a reminder to not forget our own sin natures and susceptibility to falling into the same trap. It was John Bradford who said, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” That needs to be our approach when coming alongside a struggling brother or sister in Christ.

Paul tells us that if we share one another’s burdens, we are fulfilling the law of Christ. Paul most likely is referring to the words of Jesus when He described the greatest commandment as: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40 ESV). Christianity is not about a lengthy list of dos and don’ts. It is also not about a lifestyle of self-absorbed freedom to do what you want. It is about loving God and loving others. It is about living in the grace of God and extending that same grace to all those around you. We are fools if we think we are somehow better than someone else. Our right standing before God is due to His Son’s work on our behalf, not our own self-effort. We have no right to think ourselves better than another human being. If we do, we are self-deceived. Christianity is not about comparison or competition. It is not about how spiritual I am compared with another believer. I am not to compare my sin with anyone else. As a believer, I am called to examine my own life, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and allow Him to show me my sin. If I do so, I will find I have no reason to boast or be prideful. But if I look for others to compare myself with, I can always find someone who appears to be a worse sinner than I am, and that ultimately leads to pride. Each of us is responsible for our own sin. It is not a competition. But we have a God-given responsibility to come alongside one another and encourage godliness. Christianity is a community activity. It is a team sport. We don’t grow alone. Which is why Paul told the believers in Thessalonica, “So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11 NLT).

The Season for Fruit

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. – Galatians 6:6-10 ESV

For the apostle Paul, the body of Christ was to operate in a spirit of mutual love and reciprocity. There was no place for selfishness or a what's-in-it-for-me attitude. The model Christ had left us was one of selfless sacrifice and love for others. Paul has already talked about coming alongside a fellow believer who has been caught up in sin. He has encouraged they pursue restoration, rather than practice exclusion. No one was to see themselves as somehow better than anyone else. The Christian life was to be marked by a sense of interdependence and a desire to put the needs of others ahead of your own.

God has equipped the body of Christ to care for itself. In his letter to the Ephesian believers, Paul wrote, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13 ESV). There are roles and responsibilities within the church that are designed to provide for the well-being of those who make up that local fellowship. Paul says that those who received the word of God should be willing to share what they have with those have taught them. In that day and age, those who served as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, often did so without any form of financial remuneration. Some even became itinerant teachers, traveling from city to city, in order to minister the word of God to the local congregations located in those places. Paul, as one such individual, encouraged believers to provide for the needs of these people.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul elaborated on the common expectation among believers to care for those who taught them:

Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? – 1 Corinthians 9:4-7 ESV

Paul went on to ask them the question, “If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” (1 Corinthians 9:11 ESV). Even though Paul claimed to have never demanded this God-given right to provision from the churches he ministered to,

he said, “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14 ESV).

For Paul, this all seemed to boil down to unique, God-ordained nature of the body of Christ. There was to be no lack, no need unmet. God would provide teachers to proclaim the Word and bless the listeners so they could meet the needs of the teachers. But Paul also knew there was always the temptation to sow to the flesh, or to give in to the natural inclinations of our sin natures. It would have been easy for some to see the prophets, evangelists, and teachers as lazy, because they “refused” to work. Others could have taken the approach of what is mine, is mine. In some of these communities, people had a hard enough time just making ends meet. The thought of having to give away your money or food to someone else went against the grain. But Paul encouraged them to “not grow weary of doing good” (Galatians 6:9 ESV). Man’s sin nature will always encourage selfishness and self-centeredness. Isolation and independence are normal human inclinations. But Paul knew that the success of the church was dependent upon its members sowing to the Spirit. In other words, they were to invest their time, energy, and talents into those things the Spirit was directing them to do. If they did, they would reap the kind of fruit only the Spirit can produce: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Living according to the Spirit is unnatural. It is a supernatural, divine enablement that is in direct conflict with our old natures. There is a part of us that will not want to obey what the Spirit tells us to do. We won’t want to give. We won’t want to share with others. Our natural inclination is not to share or to the needs of others ahead of our own. But Paul tells us, “...as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10 ESV). As long as we live on this planet, we will have opportunities to do good. It is in the here and now that our generosity, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control are needed. There will be no need for patience in heaven. There will be no one who has unmet needs. There will be no sin, so it will be unnecessary for us to respond to hatred with love, harsh words with words of kindness, anger with gentleness, or temptation with self-control. But as long as the Lord delays His return and we remain in this life, we will have untold opportunities to live out our faith and display the fruit of the Spirit for the benefit of all those around us. Now is the season for fruit. Now is the time to live in the power of the Spirit. Today is the day to make a difference in the lives of others as we live in dependence upon God and in mutual reliance upon one another.

An Unpopular, Yet Unwavering Message

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. 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. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen. – Galatians 6:11-18 ESV

The fear of man. It has always been a real-life, everyday problem for believers and non-believers alike. Everyone fears being rejected, disliked, misunderstood or mistreated for their views. Our deep-seated desire for attention and affection sometimes drives us to do and say things that go against what we believe. We don't want to be the odd man out. Peer pressure is a powerful force in every person's life, and Paul knew that. He was fully aware that following Christ put a target on the back of every believer. Bearing the cross of Christ was a costly endeavor that often brings His followers rejection and ridicule. Paul had experienced this first-hand. But as he closed out his letter to the Galatian believers, he pointed out that the party of the circumcision, those individuals who were demanding that all Gentile converts undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision in order to validate their salvation, were doing so out of fear of man. These Judaizers, Jews who confessed to be followers of Christ, were preaching their message out of fear of rejection by their fellow Jews. They also feared being persecuted and ridiculed for putting all their hope and faith in the cross of Christ alone. To do so would require them to reject their dependence upon the law and their reliance upon their own self-effort to justify themselves before God.

But Paul pointed out the absurdity of their logic. "Those who are trying to force you to be circumcised want to look good to others. They don't want to be persecuted for teaching that the cross of Christ alone can save. And even those who advocate circumcision don't keep the whole law themselves. They only want you to be circumcised so they can boast about it and claim you as their disciples." (Galatians 6:12-13 NLT). They cared more about what others thought of them than they did what God would think about their actions. This was man-pleasing at its ugliest. Paul knew that their message had a deadly side-effect to it that would lead people away from the saving knowledge of faith in Christ alone. For Paul, the message of salvation was found in Christ alone by faith alone. It had nothing to do with works or human effort. It could not be earned. It was a grace gift provided by God Almighty Himself. Which is why Paul appended to the end of his letter, in his own weak and scrawling hand, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14 ESV). Paul wasn't going to boast about his Hebrew heritage; his resume as a Pharisee; his education under Gamaliel, the great Hebrew rabbi; or even his missionary exploits. At one point he confessed,

“But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me – and not without results” (1 Corinthians 15:10 NLT). Paul had been transformed by the saving work of Jesus Christ. His efforts on behalf of the gospel were the result of the Spirit within him, not himself.

The primary issue threatening the Galatians believers was that of circumcision. But Paul said, “It doesn’t matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation by faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:15 NLT). This rule or principle, regarding the efficacy of the gospel, was one that would bring peace and mercy to all who lived by it. Giving in to the false message of the Judaizers would result in guilt, shame, and a never-ending attempt to win favor with God through self-effort. Paul found that choice appalling. He also wanted his readers to know that he was anything but a man-pleaser. He had suffered greatly in his effort to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world. He had the physical and emotional scars to prove it. He closed his letter with the words, “I bear on my body the scars that show I belong to Jesus” (Galatians 6:17 NLT).

The message of faith in Christ is a difficult one for people to understand and even harder to accept. It sounds absurd. The story of God taking on human flesh, dying on a cross and being raised from the dead sound crazy to most who hear it. Yet for Paul, it was the truth because he had seen it transform his life and the lives of thousands of others. The gospel was not just a message, but a powerful force for change in the world in which he lived. He believed in it wholeheartedly and preached it unapologetically. As he told the believers in Rome, living under the persecution of the Roman government, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16 ESV). Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because he believed in the power of the gospel. He was willing to suffer ridicule and rejection at the hands of men because he had placed his hope and trust in the promises of God. And he wanted every believer in Christ to know the joy of living with their faith placed firmly in the saving work of Jesus Christ and the future redemption promised to them by God. Their hope was never to waver from the simple message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.