

## Galatians 5:13-26: Righteousness without rules

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” —Ezekiel 36:26-27

1. Read aloud the verses below which use the term “flesh,” then describe what Paul means by that term.
2. Paul here instructs the Galatians that they are free from the law. Somewhat paradoxically, he proceeds to give what appears to be a list of dos (22-23) and don'ts (19-21), giving the appearance that the 600+ laws of the Torah are simply being replaced by a much smaller and more vague list for believers to follow.

Paul gives clues as to how to live: (a) serve one another humbly in love (13); (b) walk by the Spirit, in step with the Spirit (16, 25); (c) “sow to the Spirit” (6:8) by doing good to others (6:10). Nevertheless, we are left to wonder how exactly one experiences the changed nature of the indwelt believer, and, the million-dollar question, how, in the absence of the law, we bear the fruit of righteousness?

Which of the following do you think best address this question of what we need to do to bear fruit?

- a) Plants do not do anything bear fruit: they just do. So, the Spirit will work in you to bring about change of character.
  - b) We bear fruit when we stop worrying about checking the boxes of Torah obedience and instead focus on humbly loving other and putting them first. If that's our priority, the vices will evaporate and the fruit will appear.
  - c) Bruce instructs that there are two things a believer must do: crucify their fleshly desires (24); and walk by the Spirit (16), setting our minds on the things above (Rom 8:5-6; Col 3:1-2; Phil 4:8). Of the second, he says, “This will be seen in our whole way of life—in the leisure occupations we pursue, the books we read and the friendships we make... It is not enough to yield to the Spirit's control; we must also walk actively in the Spirit's way” (153-4).
  - d) Keener writes that “the way to overcome undisciplined fleshly passion is not to focus on the passion in hopes of mastering or suppressing it, but to live a life dominated by trusting in God, recognizing one's new master in place of one's old one” (252).
  - e) None of the above
3. Keener notes that Paul's vice list in 19-21 reflects sins from four categories: sexual sins (5:19); idolatry<sup>1</sup> and sorcery (5:20); relational sins (5:20-21a); and drunkenness and carousing (2:21)—or, as Bruce puts it, “sex, religion, society, and drink.”

What would you add or remove to update this list for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? (Other vice lists can be found in Rom 1:29-31; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph 5:3-5; Col 3:5, 8.)

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<sup>1</sup> Note, from Eph 5:3-5, that Paul considers greed a form of idolatry.

## A sampling of verses using the term “flesh” (*sarx*)

Rom 8:3: *For God has done what the law, weakened by the **sarx**, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the **sarx***

Gal 6:12: *It is those who want to make a good showing in the **sarx** who try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.*

Eph 2:3: *All of us once lived among them in the passions of our **sarx**, doing the will of **sarx** and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else*

1 Cor 15:39: *Not all **sarx** is alike, but there is one **sarx** for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.*

Phil 3:3-4: *For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the **sarx**—even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the **sarx**. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the **sarx**, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless*

Rom 8:5-7: *For those who live according to the **sarx** set their minds on the things of the **sarx**, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the **sarx** is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the **sarx** is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed, it cannot*

John 6:63: *It is the spirit that gives life; the **sarx** is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*

## Leader's Intro:

We jump now from Acts 10 and 15 to Galatians, particularly the paraenesis section of Galatians.

In Acts we saw the world-changing event of uncircumcised (i.e. non-proselyte) Gentiles being filled with the Spirit as a sign of conversion at learned of the gospel. This led in Acts 15 to the conclusion that Gentiles (and thus Christians) need not obey the Torah, though four practices were retained for practical reasons.

Now we meet Paul writing to the church in Galatia. They had heard the gospel from him when he was forced by illness to stay with them, and they apparently responded to it, but since have been taught by other Jewish Christians that all Christians should be circumcised.

Wright see this as a use of circumcision to both protect relations with non-Christian Jews and protect the early church from persecution—and Paul says as much regarding persecution in 6:12.

Perhaps surprisingly, esp. given the exceptions made by the Jerusalem council (the practices they advised Gentiles still follow), Paul will have none of it, and the argument he gives is deep and rich.

For Paul, to follow *any* of the law, for whatever reason, e.g. to require circumcision, is to miss the point completely. He points out that Torah was never central to following God, using Abraham as his exemplar. Further, the promise to Abraham that God would bless the nations through him is now being accomplished but that does not in any way depend on obedience to the law. Finally, Torah has never been able to produce true righteousness, which is two-fold: it is right standing with God and it is holy behavior.

Prior to our passage, Paul dealt with the former—the way in which Christ addresses our relationship with God. Here he talks about behavior, addressing the concern which was apparently on his opponents' lips, namely if you have no law, what's to keep people from doing just *anything*? Here he says plainly, in 13, you are free, but are to use that freedom to love others. And in 17, since the Spirit and flesh are in opposition, "you are not to do whatever you want."

And this is the crux of the passage: how do you live righteously without the law? Or put differently, how does Ezek 36:26-27 actually *work*?

In this passage, though, there are remarkably few exhortations. Paul doesn't substitute the law with another, different, list. What he says is, "walk by the Spirit," and "keep in step with the Spirit." He *does* of course say not to do the "works" of the flesh (19-21). If you avoid the negative and pursue the Spirit you will bear fruit.

But this still leave the reader wondering what *exactly* it means to walk by the Spirit. That's the central topic for investigation. You don't do *nothing*—this we know from 6:8; "whoever sows to please the flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." But what does that mean?

A preliminary topic before getting to the meat of the passage is Paul's use of "flesh." The flesh for Paul is the old nature, the nature you are given when born by the flesh. This includes the sinful desires of the flesh, but almost paradoxically includes the desire to *earn* our righteousness through obedience to the law.