

Galatians 5:13-26: Righteousness Without Rules

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”—Jeremiah 31:33-34

1. Quick questions:

- a) In 5:13, what are believers freed from?
 - b) Paul lists the “acts” of the flesh (19) and the “fruit” (sing.) of the Spirit (22). Is this significant?
 - c) What conflict does Paul present in this passage (17)? Does he consider the conflict normal or abnormal for believers?
 - d) What, in this passage, does Paul explicitly say *not to do* (13; 15; 16; 19; 26)?
 - e) What does Paul explicitly say *to do* (13; 16; 18; 25; 26)?
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 Spirit¹ (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 how, in the absence of the law, we bear the fruit of righteousness? For those of us who struggle with sin this is a crucial question.

Scot McKnight writes, “The most common approach to this passage is to focus on the individual fruit of the Spirit and to seek to make this list a character-building piece of instruction... I am convinced that such an approach is slightly misguided” (277). Here are three other answers to our question:

- a) F. F. Bruce: Crucify your fleshly desires (24) and walk by the Spirit (16), setting your mind on the things above (Rom 8:5-6; Col 3:1-2; Phil 4:8). “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).
- b) C. Keener: “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).
- c) G. Fee: “‘That is all fine and good,’ it is often said, ‘but *how* does one go about walking in the Spirit’...? Life in the Spirit is not passive submission to the Spirit to do a supernatural work in one's life; rather, it requires conscious effort, so that the indwelling Spirit may accomplish his ends in

¹ The verb in 25 (*stoicheō*) refers literally to people being ‘drawn up in a line’, so we walk in line with the Spirit or are aligned with the Spirit (Bruce 153). “*Stoicheō* here may thus mean something like putting our steps in the footprints of the Spirit” (Keener 264).
<https://www.pas.rochester.edu/~tim/study/study.html>

one's life. One is urged to 'walk by the Spirit' or 'live by the Spirit' by deliberately 'conforming one's life to the Spirit' (25). If such a person is also described as being 'led by the Spirit,' that does not mean passively; it means to rise up and follow the Spirit by walking in obedience to the Spirit's desire" (433).

So, what do we do to facilitate our growth, and to keep 22-23 from simply becoming a new law?

3. The law was understood as the way to become righteous. Here, Paul addresses the question of what, in the absence of the Torah, keeps the Galatians from sinking into sin and just doing whatever they wanted (17). His answer is anchored in the Spirit, which we are to be led by (18) and keep in step with (25).

An argument like this only works if the Galatians had witnessed first-hand the power of the Spirit. In fact, in 3:3-5, we read:

Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. Well then, **does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you** by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?²

Many of us began our faith journeys without the benefit of miracles demonstrating the Spirit's power and immediacy. This is not to say, though, that we haven't seen the Spirit work in power in our lives—but we need to be deliberate in remembering what we have experienced if we are to remind ourselves that the Spirit has the power to accomplish what Christ has begun in us, and to bring about the character change which sometimes feels impossibly remote.

Can you think of examples of the power of the Spirit in your life or the lives of those you know?

4. Both the flesh, in the form of pursuing righteousness through obedience to the law (6:12), and Spirit, seek the same virtues, but the flesh is doomed to failure (2:21). Yet even if we are not explicitly following the Torah, our standards of right and wrong can become for us a sort of law.

Keller says the key is to ask ourselves *why* we are trying to do the right thing. If we are acting out of fear (or other bad motives), we are operating out of the flesh. That path to holiness is not to try harder but to focus on what Christ has done for us and do the right thing for the *right* reasons.

Is spiritual growth simply (or primarily) a matter of motives?

5. Keener notes that Paul's vice list in 19-21 reflects sins from four categories: sexual sins (5:19); idolatry³ 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."⁴ How would you update this list for the 2020s? (E.g. instead of "idolatry" one might include "Christian nationalism".)

² Paul had a powerful experience of the Spirit as well, going from, under the law, a murderer, to being healed miraculously and becoming someone capable of both working miracles and forgiving his persecutors, all in the power of the Spirit.

³ Note, from Eph 5:3-5, that Paul considers greed a form of idolatry.

⁴ Other vice lists can be found in Rom 1:29-31; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph 5:3-5; Col 3:5, 8.

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.

Other notes:

- Salvation is something we “grow into” (1 Pet 2:2-3)
- This passage (Gal) shows that all Christians have two natures
- It also shows us that conflict is not a sign of failure, nor is it abnormal. Conflict is expected because we are not fully in the Spirit and so the flesh and the Spirit are in conflict in our lives and communities.
- We all have a list of things that we need to be or do in order to feel acceptable. Does this become a sort of Torah for us?
- Both flesh and Spirit can produce good behavior, but for different reasons
- We discern which we are acting out of by asking questions like, “why do I do this?” and “what if I *don't* do this?”
- If we pursue righteousness for the wrong reason, it leads to pride
- We can also tell us we are doing something out of the flesh nature if we are anxious/fearful
- Keller: to walk in the Spirit we need to articulate *why* we are doing what we are doing
- Keller: The fruit of the Spirit are the “communicable” attributes of God
- It is typical for Christians to say, “I am good at some fruit, bad at others.” But the “fruit” (*karpos*) is singular in the Greek, suggesting that these come together. If we are good at some and bad at others, it’s an indicator that we are simply relying on the flesh for the things we do right. I.e., maybe by personality we tend to try to get along with people. So that’s not a fruit of the Spirit. If at the same time we tend to avoid conflict, then confronting people in love is more likely a sign of the work of the Spirit.
- The Torah has failed to produce righteousness, righteousness having two parts: our right standing with God and behavior conforming to the character of God (Fee 421)
- Paul is here answering an important question from his critics: “Since the whole point of Torah is to lead God’s people to obedience, if you take that away, what is to keep them from doing ‘whatever they wish’ (5:17)?” (Fee 422)
- “Because of the inadequacy of Torah to empower, he agrees (a) that in any case the whole of Torah is fulfilled in the love command, (b) that such love is the fruit of the Spirit, and therefore (c) that one who is led of the Spirit is not under Torah—indeed there can be no Torah (except for “the law of Christ”) for those who live by the Spirit and so manifest the Spirit’s “fruitfulness” (Fee 422)
- “Having begun in the Spirit” we are finishing by the Spirit. This makes sense only if the beginning was *tangible*. Q: list tangible evidence of the power of the Spirit
- “Thus, as believers walk by the Spirit (i.e. with the Spirit’s empowering), they are subject neither to the flesh’s bidding (5:16) nor to the Law’s enslaving (5:18).” (Fee 423)
- The law enslaves; the flesh bids; the Spirit empowers.
- **So what do you do? This:** “Here is spelled out in very practical ways, addressed specifically to their situation, how ‘being slaves to one another through love’ is worked out in the community of the Spirit. It

means a proper estimation of oneself (vv. 3-4), over against 'conceit' (v. 26); it means 'bearing one another's burdens and thus fulfilling the law of Christ' (v. 2), over against 'envy' and 'provocation' (v. 26)." (Fee 424)

- "but to 'sow to the Spirit,' in the form of 'doing good' to one another (vv. 9-10), so that they might also 'reap' eternal life that life in the Spirit promises (v. 8)." (Fee 424)
- This is a *community* thing: "the concern from beginning to end is with Christian life in community, not with interior life of the individual Christian."
- "To the contrary, the issue from the beginning (vv. 13-15) and throughout (vv. 19-21, 26; 6:1-4, 7-10) has to do with Spirit life within the believing community. The individual is not thereby brushed aside; after all, one both enters and lives within the Christian community at the individual level. But that is where the individual believer fits into the argument. Within the context of the church each one is to live out his or her freedom by becoming love slaves to one another (v. 13). The imperative 'walk by the Spirit' does not emphasize 'the introspective conscience of the Western mind,' but rather calls for a life in the Spirit that does not 'eat and devour' one another (v. 15) and which does not through conceit provoke and envy others (v. 26). The 'fruit of the Spirit' engenders 'love, joy, and peace' within the community, not primarily within the believer's own heart (v. 22). Such a Spirit person will be among those who restore an individual who 'is overtaken in a fault' (6:1). And the final expression of 'sowing in the Spirit' is 'to do good to all people, especially those of the household of faith' (v. 10)." (Fee 425)
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Question ideas:

- Show Keller's list of the fruit of the Spirit, their opposites, and their counterfeits and ask where we particularly struggle