**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Chase Jensen

“*God and Law*”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

June 30, 2019

***1*** *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

***13****For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.****14****For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”****15****If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*

***16****So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.****17****For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whateveryou want.****18****But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

***19****The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;* ***20****idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions****21****and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

***22****But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,****23****gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.****24****Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.****25****Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

The law. When I speak that word, what does your mind first think of? Better yet, what is the first impression conjured up? Is it negative? A sensation of enmity, one built upon theological teachings that the law brings death, and enslaves us? Does your mind consider a dichotomy between law and gospel? Perhaps you think of governmental policies. Perhaps you are a little confused about just which part of the Old Testament is the law exactly. Whatever we know about the law, it often seems that we’re supposed to know it isn’t good.

When Paul writes of the law in his letter to the Galatians, he speaks about it from a very specific context. A context of deepest life-long devotion to it. One which had lead him to become a leading up-and-coming member of his religious group, the Pharisees. A devotion to the law so strong that when he thought it was being challenged by a movement surrounding a man that was crucified outside of Jerusalem, he went to the point of persecuting and killing the mans followers. This is the man who said that Christians are no longer under the Law.

Up until the time of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the people of God related to God *on the basis of* the law. It was the guiding agent that showed them the will of God, what God had commanded and what God desired for them. The law was one of the central components that set Israel apart from the other nations! Deuteronomy 4 has Moses declaring these words to the gathered people of Israel in a sermon before delivering the law code in Deuteronomy. He says,

**7**What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?**8**And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?’

The law was the great gift of the nation of Israel. Great psalms and excerpts from the Hebrew wisdom literature describe the greatness of the law of the lord given to Israel as a special entrustment. It is odd that as Christians we often regard the law as a completely negative thing, when it’s reception by Israel is a key scene in our religious heritage.

The Christian’s relationship to the law is perhaps one of the most critical shifts between the Judaism of Christ’s time and the Christian tradition which claims to be the fulfillment of it. And we see evience in the New Testament that the transition was not always smooth, nor was it without disagreement.

Before Christ, the entire life of a law-abiding Jew was filled with observance of the commands of God, seeking to be made right with God through obedience to the law. God had given the law, and it was up to the community to obey it to remain in the covenant, though we can certainly witness moments of divine grace and mercy when Israel failed to do so.

Rather than requiring obedience to the law for our justification, the gospel preached by Paul was that the people of God are justified vicariously through the work of Christ, not by their own doing. We enter into life with God through the only door, Jesus Christ, and upon our entry we are forgiven and justified. There is no amount of subsequent obedience that can earn us any more favor with God than we enter with, for we enter on account of Christ. Rather than a life-long journey of trying to justify ourselves in the sight of God we are invited into participation in the very life of God through the active presence of the Holy Spirit within our fellowships.

The church in Galatia was made up of Gentiles, the looked down upon non-Israelites—converts to the Judeo-Christian tradition from outside of its ethnic ancestry. These converts had entered into Christ through Paul’s proclamation of the gospel, and after training them in that gospel he continued on his travels. In his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul defends his gospel against another gospel that rival Christian missionaries proclaimed there when he left. We must realize that all of the issues brought about by this rival gospel took root in Galatia because Paul had been very careful not to lay down a new law for his converts after they accepted Christ. Rather than making them adopt the law of Moses, he proclaimed that after they had been made free in Christ, the Spirit of God would lead them into right behavior. As one Christian summarizes it, “Paul does not state here that Christians are to “do” or “perform” the law or works of the law to achieve righteousness or a relationship with God. Rather, he maintains that Christian love *fulfills* the law, as a *result* of one’s Christian identity and not as its *origin*.” He taught that the Spirit would guide them to love one another, which is what the Law is all about at the end of the day. The law had often been used as a way to justify humans before God, yet in Christ the Galatians were already justified. They did not need the law for that—so the Spirit was given to lead them into love and other fruits of the divine nature. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a letter to a church that was uncomfortable with the seeming ambiguity of life in the Spirit, and which had in turn listened to a different gospel.

We ought to point out that the ‘Judaizers’ you can read of in the letter to the Galatians, these rival preachers, should not be thought of as Jewish spies trying to undermine Christianity. The preachers Paul is opposing in this letter, who attempted to convince the Galatians that they were in fact still under the law of Moses, were other Jewish Christians. The disagreement was an inter-Christian disagreement. In the Acts of the Apostles we see that from the very beginning the church had a strong cohort of law-oriented interpreters of the Christ event. It took time for the church to grapple with and accept the radical implications of freedom that Christ’s saving work affected. Paul, the great apostle to the gentiles, has argued throughout this letter against the law as being authoritative in the lives of Christians after they are justified through Christ.

So after Paul had shared the gospel with the Galatians, other Christians showed up with a different gospel, and enough of the Galatians bought into it to cause all the factions and division we heard Paul warning about in the text. Now let’s give some grace to the church in Galatia. As one scholar points out, “The Missionaries’ message that the Law must provide ordered governance for the community was powerfully appealing to the Galatians because it tapped into a deep and persistent human need for rules and structure. We fear that without firm guidelines we will fall into chaos. The Missionaries brought a gospel that answered this felt need. They could offer an entirely persuasive interpretation of Scripture, and they offered clear guidance about how the Galatians should conduct their lives. Their Law-observant version of the gospel could claim to be rooted in an ancient and holy tradition. It is no wonder that their message found a hearing among a group of recent converts struggling to work out how to reorder their lives in response to the gospel.”

It seems that the question this passage comes to concerns the nature of Christian freedom, of how we are to live after being justified by christ. Does how you live matter? Am I really free if I am still battling my fallen human nature? What am I free from? What are you free for?

If our debts have been paid, can we cash out our moral credit cards once again, knowing that our Heavenly Papa will keep shoveling us out? Is that the freedom God had in mind for us? Certainly not! And yet if we are freed from the law, aren’t we left to our own devices as to how we should then live? Wouldn’t it just become a free for all, as unfortunately it can often seem to be? Was Paul crazy to leave the Galatian Christians without a clear plan or system of moral training and formation, to leave things up to the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit? What exactly was the nature of the freedom for which the Galatians had been set free?

In the time of Christ and of Paul, the ‘freedom’ of the Jew was that through the revelation of the law, the knowledge of what God commanded and desired, Israel was able to either obey it completely and become right with God, or to disregard it and remain unjustified. Even if perfect obedience could make one right with God, it would only last as long as one could manage to not violate any part of the law.

The freedom taught by Paul’s rival preachers in Galatia was that the Galatian gentiles were made free in Christ…free to join the Jews as the chosen people of God. And upon entry into the house of Israel, they would go through the same process Abraham went through when he entered into covenant with God—circumcision. They would then join in the observance of special days, Sabbaths, holidays and festivals. They would be accepted by God even though they were outside of his chosen people, and would be able to journey towards righteousness and justification through obedience to the law along with the rest of Israel that accepted Christ as a sacrifice for their previous sins. Perhaps Christ was like a reset button, whose death was the last one necessary for the extensive sacrificial system laid out in the Old Testament. Yet just as those sacrifices only made up for violations of the law, so also Christ’s death did not repeal the law but enabled humans to start over, to try again at perfect obedience.

The freedom taught by Paul is that we begin from the state of being justified with God when we put our faith in Christ—and we do not then return to the Law as our chaperone. Instead of basing our moral and ethical formation in obedience to the law we are instead to walk in the Holy Spirit. To live by the Holy Spirit. And there are no laws against the fruit the Spirit births in our lives. For Paul, freedom means that Christians no longer live under the law. It no longer serves as the basis of our connection and relationship to God. We are now and forevermore related to God on the basis of the faithfulness of Christ. It is Christ’s faithfulness, and his invitation of “Follow me” that is our path to being right with God. The freedom of Paul’s gospel is that human beings can stop having to be concerned about winning favor or justification with God, and can cease attempting to do good works in order to merit salvation.

Upon the cross Jesus took away the sins that kept us from God. The law has the ability to point out our sins; the cross has the power to remove them. The law has the ability to enslave us in the quest to earn our own justification; the cross has the power to grant us freedom; The Law has the ability to point towards God’s will for his people; the Spirit of God has the power to transform us into the types of beings who freely will God’s will.

In Christ and through the Spirit we find that God’s will for humanity was never that it would simply obey outward directives—do these things and don’t do those—in order to be justified. God desires more than our being made right with him! God wants to take human beings that are cleansed of their sins by Christ and transform them through the Spirit into new creations that willingly and freely love God and their neighbors. Transform them into creatures that love with a love that fulfills the law. Into creatures that do not obey a law code to save their own skins, since their skins and souls have already been saved by Christ. Into creatures that are truly free. Into creatures that aren’t even concerned with preserving their freedom, that are willing to use their freedom as an opportunity to enslave themselves to the good of their neighbors—something they could never do when they obeyed laws about treating neighbors rightly for the sake of saving themselves. Into creatures in the closest of relationships to God. Creatures that draw their very lives from the life of the Spirit. To be free in Christ is to be free from the law as the means of our justification, and to be free from our fallen nature by our crucifixion of it in Christ; and ultimately, to be free in Christ is to be free from ourselves so that we might be free to truly love God and love our neighbor. When we are no longer loving God and our neighbor as a means to save ourselves, we are finally and truly free to love others.

Sisters and brothers, we do not need to justify ourselves with God! Glory be to Christ! He has set us free from our sins and from the need to justify ourselves by the law. We who have put our faith in Christ are finally free to actually love each other, to selflessly give of ourselves, our time, energy, prayers, and resources to the broken and needy world around us with no motive or need of earning any favor with God from the action. The Spirit of God which lead Jesus out into the wilderness, to the cross, and out of the tomb is the one that will lead us who are made free in Christ. The fear experienced by the Galatians who wanted more order and clear guidance about how to live their lives lead them to accept a gospel of law-observance, as opposed to Paul’s gospel of living in step with the Spirit. How tempting it is for us to desire the same! Yet no written code, no law or ethical mandate will ever enact the transformation of the human heart as the living Spirit of God will. We are talking about the same spirit that hovered over the waters at creation, that brought order out of chaos, that split the red sea and filled the temple in Jerusalem with the presence of God, that raised Christ Jesus from the dead—the same Spirit that will raise us from the dead should Christ tarry his return. This is the Spirit of God, who is described by Paul elsewhere as a God not of confusion but of peace. What written system or plan could ever rival the living and eternal Spirit of God in teaching how we then should live as justified creatures in this good universe being redeemed by Christ?

Unfortunately, in our desire for order and structure, the same as the Galatians, we strive to turn Paul’s message of radical trust in and dependency on the Spirit into a system we can control. In fact, we are prone to take this very passage of scripture, which as one Christian comments is “the most impassioned defense anywhere in Scripture of the sufficiency of the Spirit to guide the community of faith”; we take this scripture and we turn it into the new list of do’s and don’ts. We replace the Law of Moses with Galatians 5 and other non-comprehensive New Testament lists of moral and immoral behaviors, and we are back again to the same old game of trying to justify ourselves through them before God. We are prone to read the fruit of the Spirit as a list of virtues which we ought to cultivate within ourselves, completely missing the gospel news that these are the fruit birthed in us as we walk in the Spirit, not the fruit of a human being trying to please God by their own strength. This move is the exact one made by the rival preachers that Paul opposes in the Letter to the Galatians, except we trade the law of Moses for a list of illustrative behaviors written by Paul. Paul would say to any who are guilty of this the same thing he wrote to the Galatians in chapter 3: “You foolish Christians! Who has bewitched you? **3**… Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? **…** **5**… does God[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+3&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-29091a)] 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?”

Though after 2000 years we no longer are tempted to relapse into complete observance of the Law of Moses, we do have our own laws and systems we are enslaved by. Perhaps it is the pietistic pressure we feel to have a devotional time every morning—if we miss it, is our relationship with God strained? Must we come to God with our tail between our legs? Perhaps it’s an outward moral standard: don’t drink, don’t chew, and don’t hang out with people who do! Perhaps after coming to Dayspring you were introduced to a more contemplative spirituality, and if you aren’t able to find or make the time to practice centering prayer or get away for a spiritual retreat or meet with a spiritual director, or God forbid you can’t figure out your enneagram number—do you believe and act as if you are distant from God? Anytime doing or not doing an activity causes us to feel or believe we are distant from God it indicates that perhaps we are putting trust in that activity as the basis of our being right with God, and not our trust in Christ.

Today, and through the rest of your life, you have the choice—you can remain enslaved to a law or any other formula of getting right with God, or you can be made free and right with God through placing your faith in Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Rather than spending your life trying to obey a law code, you can enter into the transformative re-creation that the Spirit of God is yearning to work in your life with your cooperation.

Sisters and Brothers, as we prepare to receive the body and blood of our lord as a fellowship, let us receive it as those who are free in Christ. As those who, by the very body and blood here consumed are set free from bondage to any system or law that would us earn our place in the presence or favor of God. The faithful death of Christ which we together viscerally remember is our liberation from sin and bondage to the law. As we receive it together this morning, let it not be a way merely of assuring your own individual justification before God. Let the event it remembers be the lesson and example of how we might joyfully use our freedom for one another and for the whole world. Amen.

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**Study Notes**

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“Paul does not state here that Christians are to “do” or “perform” the law or works of the law to achieve righteousness or a relationship with God. Rather, he maintains that Christian love *fulfills* the law, as a *result* of one’s Christian identity and not as its *origin*.” TEBC 625

Paul rejects any gospel that preaches that right standing or favor with God can be earned on the basis of the law, but he does not hesitate to say that in Christ, the believer has the Spirit’s enablement to fulfill the requirements of the law to love God and love neighbor. TEBC 626

NIV McKnight

* “the antidote to the flesh is living in the Spirit, not obeying the law of Moses.” 236
* “The Galatian converts were insecure about their moral guidance and in particular about how to fight off the flesh. The Judaizers, having been taught that the law of Moses is God’s moral guide, contended that it would enable the Galatian converts to fight off the flesh. Paul contends that the flesh has actually been put to death already and that the means of moral guidance has already been given: God’s spirit…In other words, the Spirit takes the place of the law for the Christian.” 265
* “[Paul] is taking away the law of Moses in the letter to the Galatians as passé, but he does so by way of fulfillment.” (love your neighbor as yourself) 268
* “…one does not gain this life by discipline or by mustering up the energy…Rather, the Christian life is a life of consistent surrender to the Spirit.” 269
* “The change of terms to “fruit” evokes a different image: from one of human responsibility to one of divine enablement. The image of fruit has a certain sense of passivity to it; it is the Spirit of God who produces such things, and they grow in the life of the Christian.” 271

How are we made right with God?

-For the Jews of the day, it was through rigid obedience to the law of Moses and moral perfection. The gospel that Paul taught was that our justification, being made right with God, was enacted by Christ’s death on the cross. The end goal of Jewish obedience was made the starting point of Christian life. Since they are no longer bound as slaves to the law, Christians are free from the need to ‘get right with God’. Our lives need not center upon getting in with God; they no longer need be centered upon our self-preservation. In this way we are free to join in the Spirit of Christ, who had no concern for his self-preservation, nor for making sure he was acceptable to God—but who in his freedom willingly gave his life not only for his friends, but even for his enemies.

-I wonder if Willard’s reading of this text, that Christians ought to crucify their flesh’s passions through spiritual disciplines, is another way to ‘Judaize’ the radical freedom given to Christians, except in the manner of Greek virtue theory.

-how many of us today would be willing to leave a new group of converts with a faith in Christ and very little moral or ethical guidance? How many of us truly could trust in the spirit of God to guide those new believers into the way of life, the way of love, the way of Christ?

“How can we accuse the Galatians of being gullible and of embracing what was clearly an inferior system when we are unable and unwilling to live with the open-endedness of the Pauline view of Christian freedom? Do we perhaps also want legal guidelines and Mosaic law?” (McKnight, 273)

How can we come to believe that the Spirit’s guidance is in fact a sufficient guide for a moral life before God?

We must ask ourselves: “Is our ethic an ethic of freedom in the Spirit or is it much more like that of the Judaizing invaders?” (McKnight 273)