

3

Free to Choose



RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Galatians 5:16-18

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”

Galatians 5:13-14

Free to Choose

After graduating from high school in South Georgia, I attended a junior college some distance away from where I grew up. Having decided to eventually attend Georgia Tech and major in engineering, my first year at junior college included calculus and chemistry. In addition, the basketball coach had recruited me to play ball, requiring hours of practice time each day, and games took us out of town for extended periods. Both endeavors required a significant amount of time. To say that I was stretched would be an understatement.

I enjoyed playing ball. I had been involved in organized sports for years and had experienced the perks of doing well on the field and on the court. The recognition and exhilaration of participating successively in sports is a high. Even though I was not currently a starter on the team, everyone knew that the next year would be my year. However, during Christmas break, my father helped me put my priorities in order. After much agonizing, I came to the conclusion that I needed to spend more time with my books, preparing to attend Tech the following year rather than becoming a starter on a basketball team. Returning to school, I quit the team to concentrate

RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

on the books. Yes, I missed playing, but never attended a game after that decision. It would have been too hard to just observe and not be part of the action.

I have had to make similar choices throughout my whole life—in business, in personal relationships, etc. And so have you. There are

*“Pulls” are
inevitable but the
critical issue is
how we address
them.*

always the “pulls.” One thing pulls you in one direction and another thing pulls you in the other. “Pulls” are inevitable but the critical issue is how we address them. What is the criterion for choosing the best from the good or the good from the bad? At no time are these choices more important than when making spiritual decisions. In Galatians 5, Paul warned of these tensions in the

Christian life. There he addressed the competing influences that tug on you and me as believers in Christ.

Competitive Walking

After defending his authority as an apostle and the gospel of Jesus Christ in Galatians 1–2, Paul presented the principle of justification by faith alone (Gal. 3–4). He concluded the book with the application of justification in the lives of those who had already been declared righteous by faith alone (Gal. 5–6). In the concluding section, Paul identifies two divergent alternatives facing a believer: (1) to allow one’s freedom in Christ to lead to bondage (5:1-6), reverting back to the Mosaic Law, or (2) to allow one’s freedom in Christ to lead to license (5:13-15). The former is biblical legalism; the latter is unrestricted liberty. The former is Mosaic-Law-keeping; the latter is lawlessness. Arguing that both paths are contrary to the truth of the gospel, Paul then provided the answer in 5:16-18.

FREE TO CHOOSE

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

The alternative is to “walk by the Spirit” and, as a result, “you will not carry out the desires of the flesh” (whether legalism or license).¹ This choice includes a command and a promise. A command involves either a reality that can be experienced or a condition that may be forfeited. Obedience or disobedience is the issue; that is the nature of a command. The grammatical construction assumes as well the realistic possibility of “walking by the flesh.” To live in the flesh would lead to the believer’s inability to achieve the spiritual goal set by Paul, which was to live within the Spirit’s influence. Living under the Spirit’s guidance is the ultimate purpose of Paul’s command to believers in Galatia as well as for every believer.

A command involves either a reality that can be experienced or a condition that may be forfeited.

No one should envision a puppet or a robot explanation in which the Spirit causes correct behavior. Rather, believers are instructed to live their lives by the Spirit. This equally applies in a negative sense to the flesh since the Spirit is contrasted with the flesh in the entire section of Galatians 5: 1-25. Richard Longenecker explains the options facing the believer when he writes, “Thus the Christian may choose to use his or her freedom in Christ either as ‘an opportunity for the flesh’ or in response to ‘the Spirit.’ Paul calls on his converts

RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

to renounce the former, thereby being open to the latter.”² Both the Spirit and the flesh are competing factors by which the believer allows himself to be influenced whether in thoughts or through actions. Here lies the choice: either to live under the old sin capacity or to live in a new way pleasing to God. The consequence of the former is sin, while the latter results in good works.

Continuing in verse 17, Paul pictures the battleground in making right choices. “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the

*Believers must
choose which one
they will follow—
the flesh’s entice-
ments or the
Spirit’s guidance.*

Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another.” The desires of the flesh (legalism and license) are opposed to the desires of the Spirit. In fact, they are mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed. One is to be pursued; the other is to be rejected. In either case believers must choose which one they will follow—the flesh’s enticements or the Spirit’s guidance. As a result, believers can behave in ways

that do not reflect their position in Christ. Wrong choices lead to sinful behavior. Right choices lead to spiritual maturity.

The impetus for making right moral choices is further explained by the if/then construction of verse 18. “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” The implication of being “led by the Spirit” (a synonym of “walking by the Spirit” in verse 16 and “living by the Spirit” in verse 25) is that the Mosaic Law is of no effect. In the context of Galatians, law is related to the flesh and both are contrasted with the Spirit. They are incompatible with one another. Freedom in the Spirit is the antidote to legalistic bondage in the flesh (5:1).

In fact in Galatians 5:13-14 we are told that believers are called to freedom in order to “serve one another.”

FREE TO CHOOSE

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”

Service is the ultimate characteristic of walking by the Spirit (v. 16) or being led by the Spirit (v. 18). Paul contrasted serving with license, doing whatever you want without regard for anyone else. Freedom in Christ is not freedom from the “pulls” that draw us away from God. According to Romans 6:15-20, believers are free to serve God. “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin...you became slaves of righteousness” (vv. 17-18). Prior to salvation, an individual had only one option—slavery to sin. Salvation brings with it two alternatives—slavery to God or slavery to sin. These correspond to the believers’ two choices—the capacity to live according to the flesh or according to the Spirit (Col. 3:5-14; Gal. 5:16-23). Choosing well makes the difference.

Are All Laws Equal?

The instruction of Galatians 5:3-14 is that “the whole law is fulfilled” when believers “love their neighbors as themselves”—as they “serve one another.” One wonders how it can be that when a believer is “led by the Spirit” he is “no longer under the law” (v. 18); but at the same time the believer is to “fulfill the law by serving others.” So which is it—are believers under the law or not? The answer is found in distinguishing between laws.

Three laws should be carefully considered to gain a proper perspective of this apparent, scriptural dilemma. *First*, men who

First Law:

Natural law within governed by one's conscience

RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

have no law directly provided by God are aware instinctively of the principle of right and wrong (Rom. 2:14-15). They have a natural law within that is governed by their conscience. This first inner law does not seem to take center stage in the argument of Galatians. Nevertheless this law formed within is unfortunately the standard people use when passing judgment on others (e.g., dancing, drinking, playing cards, going to movies, or whatever else is on the list). This is not the law concerning us in the book of Galatians.

Second, in Galatians, the Mosaic Law is the obvious culprit. It is this yoke, the yoke of the Law to which Paul addressed his concern regarding legalism. The Law given to Moses at Mount Sinai was

*Second Law:
The Mosaic Law
provided the way
and the means for
Israel's commu-
nion, not union,
with God.*

the written code of conduct for the Jewish nation. The Mosaic Law was never provided as a means for salvation (i.e., relationship with God). Instead the Law was the means by which the nation could have fellowship with God. Obedience to the Mosaic Law provided the way and the means for Israel's communion, not union, with God. In Galatians Paul argued that the Mosaic code is no longer valid since Christ has come to provide a new way by the Spirit (Gal. 3:19-25), a new way of

living in fellowship with God. Because of this important change, he writes, "If you are led (or walk) by the Spirit, you are not under Law" (Gal. 5:18), at least not the Mosaic Law.

A *third* law takes center stage. However, before addressing it, we should make a quick review of history. In the final week before His crucifixion, Jesus was asked, "Which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matt. 22:35). The question was meant to summarize the Old Testament code. Christ responded with "love," but love directed in two directions: "love your God" and "love your neighbor"

FREE TO CHOOSE

(vv. 36-37). One direction is vertical; the other is horizontal. Since to love your neighbor is to serve him (Gal. 5:13-14; John 13:14-15, 34; 15:12-13), the principle likewise applies in the vertical plane—to love God is to serve Him (14:21).

Interestingly Jesus not only came to fulfill the Law (Matt. 5:17), but Paul stated that believers continue to fulfill the law as they serve one another (Gal. 5:14; 6:2). Now, since the argument of Galatians is that the Mosaic Law has been cancelled out for the believer, to what law was Paul referring? It is called the law of

Christ (Gal. 6:2), the law of liberty (James 1:25; 2:12), and the royal law (James 2:8).³ God's desire throughout history for all believers in Him is that they love God and love one's neighbor. Frankly, it is doing the right thing toward God and toward the people around you. If we are seeking another's highest good (the definition of biblical love), we are truly serving them.

I lived in northern California's Silicon Valley for two decades and experienced a number of earthquakes. However, the 1989 quake shook beyond one's wildest imagination. If you remember, that is when the World Series was halted. Bridges fell during rush hour in one of the most populated areas in the United States. I was walking to my car in the parking lot when everything began to rock and roll. The drive home usually took thirty minutes. All nine traffic lights were out and the traffic was unusually heavy since everyone was trying to get home at the same time. However, it only took me five extra minutes to arrive at my house. How could that be? Everyone was doing the right thing because everyone wanted to get home and to see their family and evaluate the damage. If I had not been there to see it, I would not have believed it myself. At every traffic light, none of which were working, cars moved slowly but consistently as if being shuffled like a deck of cards. There was no sound of

Third Law:

*The law of liberty
is to love God
and to love your
neighbor.*

RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

horns or unwelcome gestures. Rather, courtesy was the hallmark of the day. Traffic-light rules were nonexistent and each driver had to decide what would be the best way to respond. Consideration rather than chaos was evident. People were doing the right thing and we arrived home nearly as fast a normal.

God's heart desire, at least the essence of it, has never altered. Believers are to do the right thing toward God and toward the people around them. What has changed is the actual means of expression. John used Cain and Abel as a negative example of one brother not serving his own brother (1 John 3:11-12; Gen. 4:1-8). Cain demonstrated zero love for his brother. Even without a written code of laws prior to the giving of the Mosaic Law, believers were to love God and love others. At Sinai, God's will was summarized in the first four commands of the Decalogue, addressing love for God, and in the latter six commands, addressing love for our neighbors. Of the six-hundred-and-thirteen further stipulations, the ceremonial laws relate to the vertical plane, our love for God, while the moral and civil laws concern the horizontal plane, our love for our neighbor.⁴ Extensive development of God's law to Moses and the nation concerned the establishment of a theocracy, addressing national as well as individual responsibility. As Paul explained, the Mosaic Law is no longer valid for believers. But, the expression of God's heart has not changed—our love for Him and our love for our neighbor. In addition, Christ and the apostles put flesh on the love-God/love-neighbor skeleton by means of the commands in the New Testament. Some may be identical to those found in the old law—not because the old code is valid, but because they are restated in the New Testament.

Stephen Westerholm puts “doing the law” and “fulfilling the law” in proper perspective when he writes, “‘doing’ the law is what is *required* of those ‘under the law’; ‘fulfilling’ the law, is, for Paul, the *result* of Christian living *the norms of which are stated in quite different terms.*”⁵

FREE TO CHOOSE

Decisions! Decisions! Decisions!

Competing influences require that we be careful to align our behavior with God's Word. Knowing the heart of God, as seen in the New Testament, we then must make the choice to walk according to His Word. Our behavior, nevertheless, can reflect our own self-motivated desires straight from our sin capacity. If we do this, we are making a choice to live in a way that is opposed to our true position in Christ.

To love God and to love your neighbor is the heart of God's desire for every believer. This has always been His desire for His people. However, we need not have every single "don't" spelled out in black and white to know the right thing to do. The same goes for the "do"

side of the equation. Ultimately we should be putting everyone's interests above our own, seeking everyone's best. Doing the right thing should be spontaneous, but we have "pulls" in our lives that can influence our choices in the other direction. We need to always remember that the decisions we make each day, no matter how seemingly insignificant, will be evaluated when we are finally in heaven (but that is another story).

*Competing
influences require
that we be careful
to align our
behavior with
God's Word.*

RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

Chapter 3, NOTES

1. Biblically, “flesh” is used in a number of ways. In Galatians 5, it is used in an ethical sense, meaning “the tendency within human beings to disobey God in every area of life” (Anthony A. Hoekema, *Five Views of Sanctification*, Reformed View [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 84). “The flesh...is the old capacity which all men have to live lives which exclude God” [Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 35.].
2. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 241.
3. Concurring with this assessment Zane Hodges says, “In fact, James’ concept of the Christian life as a law of liberty implicitly sets it in contrast with the OT law and is very analogous to Paul’s statement that we are to fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2)” (*The Epistle of James* [Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994], 44-45).

Also Richard Longenecker provides two alternatives, both of which contrast with the Mosaic Law (*Galatians*, 275-276).
4. It should be noted that the distinctions (moral, civil, and ceremonial) of the Law are never indicated in Scripture; rather they are only theological distinctions.
5. Stephen Westerholm, “On Fulfilling the Whole Law (Gal 5:14),” *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 51–52 [1986–87]: 229-37, cited in Longenecker, *Galatians*, 243.