

Again, good morning, my name is George Davis, thanks for being a part of our services this morning. And if you've been with us in the last couple of weeks, you've noticed that we're moving into this series called Love This Book, it's actually Love This Book, Part Four. We have devotional guides available, if you'd like to pick one of those up and you haven't already. And we're going to be journeying through the letters of the Apostle Paul, and we're actually gonna start today with a passage in the book of Galatians. So if you have a Bible, I'm gonna ask you to join with me and turning to Galatians Chapter 5, Galatians Chapter 5. As we begin this journey of following the ministry of the apostle Paul, and we're gonna basically go through his letters and what is arguably the order in which they were written. As we follow his life in ministry, I think one of the things that becomes clear in working through the latter part of Acts as well as the letters of Paul, is that from the very earliest stages, there were ways in which Christianity could be misunderstood.

That's true today. And that was true then. It was true from the very beginning. In fact, one of the realities is this, as you do study particularly the life of Paul, as we see it in the second part of Acts, we see Paul engaging on these different ministry and missionary journeys where he travels throughout different parts of the ancient Roman world, and he's communicating the gospel of Christ, and we're seeing the start of churches. And then as these groups of Christians begin to form and begin to kind of seek to follow Jesus, over time, their missteps, there's false teaching or misunderstandings and so these letters do continue those relationships as Paul is seeking now to give counsel in different ways to these early churches about what it means to be shaped by the gospel, how to live out the gospel, and as he does that, he's often addressing particular challenges faced by specific churches. And the book we're looking at this morning is a clear example of that, the Book of Galatians. Now, as you're reading in Acts in the early parts of Paul's ministry, we see in Acts Chapter 13 and 14 of his initial journey and spreading the gospel in the ancient Greco-Roman world. And he traveled throughout parts of Asia Minor, that's an area of the world we now know as Turkey. And that included a region known as Galatia. Let me just show how you see Galatia in the middle of that.

And apparently what happened is this right, he travels, he travels throughout this region, communicating the message of Christ, people are becoming followers of Jesus, and we're seeing these fledgling communities of believers begin to start, these early churches began to start. But after Paul left, apparently there were other teachers that came into the region. And their message was something like this, Hey, it's great you've become a follower Jesus, we're glad Paul communicated that message, but he didn't really tell you the rest of the story. And the rest of the story is this, now that you become a follower of Jesus, in order to maintain your relationship with God, you need to continue following the Jewish law, you need to keep the Jewish law. And when we read the book of Galatians, apparently to some degree, their message gained traction. And so this book is written to churches in that area, in the order to say, no, no, you've got to stick to the gospel that I communicated, that was preached to you.

So in chapter one Paul will say things like this, he said, Look, I'm astonished, you were called to live in the grace of Christ, you've been called into this message of grace, to this work of grace. So why are you deserting that for a different gospel? And he says in that different gospel is really no gospel, it's no good news at all. And you get to chapter 3 and he says, I mean Paul doesn't hold anything back here. You foolish Galatians. You foolish people, who has bewitched you? And building on that question, Paul in essence says This, look, I want you to understand that the law has had a particular role in Jewish history. The law has had a particular role in God's plan of restoration and redemption, but ultimately in God's plan, what the law has done is the law has brought us to the

work of Christ. And now that the work of Christ has taken place, you're not under the law. Now, that doesn't mean we can't learn from the law, because the law does communicate the purposes of God, but you are not under the law. The law is not that which maintained your relationship with God. You have been brought into a new relationship with him through the work of Jesus Christ. And you get to the latter part of the letter, and Paul begins to kind of now explain the implications of what he's been talking about. And so we read this in Acts chapter 5. I love this. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. I just let that sink in. It is for freedom that Christ us free. Did you hear that? So stay stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. And of course, the particular yoke of slavery, he's referring to here is being under the law.

You are free. I realize for some of us that surprising that freedom may not be the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about Christianity. But that's exactly what Paul says here. And yet, I think in a different way when we read this, perhaps there are ways in which this just naturally resonates with us. Because when you think about it, freedom is an important value in our culture, right. And typically when we think, when today, when we think about freedom, we often think about freedom as kind of what I call freedom from. Freedom from oppression. Freedom from control. Freedom from harassment. Freedom from constraint. And I think for some of us, even when we think about freedom we think about freedom in very personal terms. It's a young adult, I look forward to moving out of my parents' house and being on my own and experiencing that freedom. Or maybe you kinda look back over the history of your work career, was really glad when my boss changed, I wasn't under this micro-managing director and I experienced new freedom. Or maybe you think about, I'm looking forward to moving into retirement and the freedom that will come with that. We value freedom. From certain things, from restrictions, freedom from the control of others. And so I think for a lot of people, we read this and we go, yes, well, I love it. You're talking about freedom, you're speaking my language. And particularly for some of us, perhaps maybe that at some point, we've been in church environments that seem to be legalistic or controlling, and you're like, Man, I'm glad, that's not the message of true Christianity. And Paul says, Look, it is for freedom that Christ has set you free. But as it turns out, when Paul talks about being under the yoke of the law and this external restraint, as it turns out that's not the only problem that he makes us aware of in this passage. Because Paul continues, and notice what he addresses, beginning in verse 13. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. And we go, yes. And he says, but do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command, love your neighbor as yourself. If you bite and devour each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other.

And like we're right here, and Paul's talked about, you know, Hey, you're not under the law. You're free, and we resonate with that for so many reasons, culturally, personally, experientially, and go, Yes, we're free. This Christianity brings freedom. Paul goes but, but there's something else you need to be aware of. And Paul calls that the flesh.

And you know, we're gonna be going through Paul's letters at different times, you will see Paul talk about the problem of what he calls the flesh. Now, what does he mean by that? Here, I think we have to be very careful because the underlying Greek term is a term that can carry different sorts of meanings depending on the context. And in some context, right? This term flesh is really used the way we think about flesh, right, the term flesh can simply refer to my physical being, we might talk, when we talk about flesh and bones. Well, that's referring to my physical, material being, and at times, this term can carry that meaning. But in other contexts, it's not really describing our physical makeup like my flesh. It's really describing something deeper. It's describing our outlooks, our

attitudes, our personal orientation that is turned against God. It refers to our orientations towards selfishness, toward sinfulness. When author has described the flesh, it's describing the coping mechanisms for life that we use apart from God. Or someone else that said, our flesh is love turned in on itself.

Now, let me kinda go back to something we talked about last week. Remember Paul talks about this age and the age to come. And the reality is, we still live in this age, the age of brokenness and sinfulness. And so when he talks, when he talks about the flesh, what Paul is talking about is, it's our orientation towards life that is simply rooted in this age. So that's what Paul is getting at here. And can I suggest, here's where Paul's understanding of freedom begins to challenge how we think about freedom.

Again, I think in so many contexts, when we think about freedom, we simply think about freedom as freedom from external control. Freedom from external constraints. We live in a free country, that means I should have the freedom to determine what I'm going to do with my life, where I live, the jobs I will pursue. And other people aren't going to control me, I'm free from external control. We feel that messaging and phrases like, Well, just be true to yourself, pursue your dreams, follow your heart, go with your desires. But what if I experience competing desires? What if my desires aren't always healthy, what if my desires change with time, and you see here's what Paul is getting it. Just because you are free externally, and particularly for these people, just because you're not under the law, doesn't mean you are free internal. Just because you are free externally, right? Yeah, you've got control of your life, nobody's telling you what to do, you don't live in an oppressive government. And just because you are free externally, you seem to be making all the decisions, that doesn't mean you are free internally. Because you may be stuck in an approach to life that is governed by the flesh.

Someone who I think really came to understand this, wrestle with it, and write about it in a very articulate way, was the Christian leader who actually lived in the fourth century, hundreds of years ago. This guy, just kind of a painting of the guy, we know it as Augustine. And of course, in some contexts he's often referred to as Saint Augustine. The fascinating thing is, when you study his life, when you go back to the earliest parts of his life, he was anything but a saint. Right? He'd grown up, his mother, Monica was a Christian and kind of a committed Christian, it seems to be very thoughtful woman, and yet growing up, he turned against that. He grew up in North Africa. And when he was able, he went off to Carthage, the big city to continue his education and when he went off to the big city, he decided to try everything and do everything. And he really adopted a hedonistic lifestyle and just, you know, everything that was open to him he tried. And you can just let your imagination go wild thinking. Right recently, obviously with the publication of the memoir of Prince Harry, at times, people are surprised that how transparent he's been about some of the things he did when he was younger. And I think if Augustine had read that, he said, Man, I did that too. I was right there with you.

But ultimately over time, he just is, he kind of restricted nothing as he tried everything, as he lived. The desires of his heart run wild. He said, it didn't bring happiness. It wasn't fulfilling. There's a futility in it. And ultimately in that kind of brokenness, he found himself coming back to the message of Christ. And he became a follower of Jesus. And years later as he was, he would write his own life story, his own memoir, we notice the confessions. He would look back and what he came to realize was, you know that season of freedom, I thought it was freedom, but it was just its own sort, a prison. One of the ways Augustine kinda talks about what Paul would describe as the

flesh is this, Augustine says, The problem in this age and this age of brokenness, this problem of sin is a problem of what he described as disordered loves. And he said what that means is on the one hand, it means we can be drawn to love the wrong things, but furthermore means we can love the right things, but we love them in the wrong way, or we love them in the wrong order. And he said, I look back in my life and he said, This created its own sort of prison. In fact, let me just, let me just read you a quote from the confessions. He said, The consequence of a distorted will, and here, I think he's getting to what Paul describes as the flesh. He said, the consequences of a distorted will is passion. And again, he's talking about kind of sinful passion. And he says, By servitude to passion, habit is formed. And habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links as it were, connected one to another, which he calls a chain, a harsh bondage, held me under restraint. He said, I thought I was living in freedom, but it turns out my freedom was simply links in the chain that we're holding me captive. And the brokenness, my flesh, that selfishness turned inward created unhealthy desires that led to habits and patterns, and even for some, addiction. And he says, I thought this was freedom, but what I thought was freedom was actually the bondage of the flesh. And I think that's exactly what Paul is describing here.

This life under the flesh, is a life turned in on itself. In selfishness that can produce habits and over time patterns and even addictions. And maybe some of you, you've kinda just seen the way certain negative habits or patterns have developed in your own life, right. Maybe the ways your life has at times turn inward in unhealthy ways. Perhaps to certain circumstances or experiences, I kinda turn inward and I become enslaved to the desire of self-protection. So I avoid conflict. I avoid hard conversations. I engage people in a way that I'm always self-protective and in my own way, even though I'm around lots of people, I keep my distance. And now I'm bound to isolation.

Maybe to feel good about myself, I've just developed a keen eye for the fault of others. And it's always easy to point them out and you know, in my friend group, I'm always the first one that can create a funny moment by putting other people down. And it just comes naturally. And so now this has just become this pattern in which I'm really enslaved to. A selfishness that's always critical of other people. And so Paul says these are patterns under the flesh. And as a passage continues, he gives different examples, let me just read for you, if you got your Bible open, the beginning in Verse 19. The acts of the flesh, your obvious sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 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. So Paul says, look, look, when our lives turn into ourselves, when we leave space for the flesh to be at work, this selfish orientation that is part of this age, when that really dominates who we are, it leads to all sorts of unhealthy self-indulgence, it leads to sexual sin and impropriety, it leads to things that break down relationships, and in our own way, we become imprisoned to that which we thought was giving us freedom.

Now, for those of us who are followers of Christ, I think there is something that Paul really wants us to understand and to show you that. Let's just go back to verses 16 and 17. Paul says, So I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Now notice what he says is happening here. He says, 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 whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now notice what Paul is particularly highlighting in the middle of this passage. It's conflict. Right? Paul has said, Look, you know, we started it, it sounded so great, right? A moment ago, we've got this problem of external constraint being under the law, no, you've got freedom, you're under the law, but you need to

understand something about freedom, because if you're not careful, what you think is freedom is maybe actually experiencing the internal control of the flesh. And in warning us against that, he says, and you need to understand, if you're a follower, Christ, the flesh is gonna war against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.

Now again, just kind of remind you of something I pointed out last week, right. Paul says, Look, we live in this age of brokenness and sin, but this new age, the age to come made possible through the work of Christ, has now invaded. Christ called it the Kingdom of God. And if you are a follower Jesus, if you put your faith and trust in Christ, this is where your identity is now rooted. We all live in this age, but this now defines your true self. And so in light of this, there's an overlapping of these ages. Between the first coming of Christ and his return, when this kingdom comes in his final form. And we live in the overlapping of these ages. And one of the things we have to understand, this is what Paul is highlighting here. And one of the things we have to understand is this, this age of overlapping ages is a war zone. There will be conflict. Now, the final victory has already been achieved, but that doesn't diminish the reality of the skirmishes that will be a part of the overlapping of these ages.

And that's exactly what Paul is talking about here. He started again by saying, Look, you're not under the law, but even in telling people you're not under the law, he's also saying, look, but I don't want you to get caught up in simply serving the reality of this fleshly orientation because this isn't who you are. But I want you to understand, soberly, that we live in this time where the flesh will war against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. And so you need to understand that.

Now, let's just think for a moment about the implications of understanding that. As I was thinking about this week, that this week, my mind actually back to a scene from two weeks ago. If you're an NFL fan, you may have been watching this game two weeks ago. Right the Monday Night Football game between the Bills and Cincinnati. And early in that game, there was a player who was injured. My son and I were actually watching this game. And Damar Hamlin goes down, and it's customary often in football games when a player is injured, if it takes a little while to treat the person that they cut to commercial, and so they cut to commercial and then they did it actually a couple of times, and I'm not sure, I don't remember how many times they cut to commercial, but finally they came back, and that's when they said they're giving this player CPR on the field. And I remember my son and I were kind of just casually watching the game, and all of a sudden were drawn in cause we'd never seen that on a ball field before. And all of a sudden it's like your perspective changes. Injuries are part of the game, but all of a sudden it's like your mindset changes, and in that moment, you realize there's a lot more important things than this football game. And it's playoff implications. This is a matter of life and death. Now, fortunately, he has had an amazing recovery since then, if you continue to follow his story, but at that moment, it was like your perspective just totally changed and the football game receded into the background, in fact, they made the unprecedented call to suspend. To cancel the rest of the game, and that was that. Once he was taken off the field in an ambulance. And it just changed your whole perspective about the game, about what was going on because now it became a matter of life and death. And in a similar way, I think for us, when we begin to understand, when we take seriously this reality that, okay, this season, we now live in between the first and second comings of Christ. There's just conflict here. That just changes things. And certain things need to be brought to the front and certain things need to recede to the back. And among other things, I think for us as followers of Christ, when we look at ourselves, what Paul is saying here should just encourage self-awareness. Be aware that you will experience competing desires in life.

I go to the gym Tuesday nights and Saturday mornings. But on my way home, I pass a Sheetz, and they can be competing desires. You wanna spend time in prayer and scripture, but you know what, I enjoy sleeping in. I wanna have good conversations with my family, but I enjoy scrolling through social media. Maybe you say, I really don't want to objectify people, but at times I'm drawn to certain images online. And so as followers of Christ, we need to be attuned to this. Paul was highlighting this because he wants us to be aware of this. And I think I also need to realize, particularly in moments of temptation, my strongest desires may not be my deepest desires. At some points, the only desire you may feel is that desire to do the wrong thing. Yet when you're away from that moment, there's this awareness that this is not part of my identity in Christ. So I need to be aware that this will be my experience. I shouldn't be surprised by that, so I need to be aware. At times they're gonna be desires that come to mind that draw away from the desires needed to follow Christ. So understanding the conflict that Paul is talking about here should foster a certain self-awareness. Likewise, I think it should affect how we deal with one another. We need to be aware that we're in this together, so can we be for one another? Right later in Galatians Paul says, Look, when you are, when you see someone caught, restore them gently. So think about your relationships here in the life of our church. Are there places where you can actually have conversations and say, look, here's what's weighing me down. Here, here's what's trying to pull me in a wrong direction, and I'm not always handling this well. But I need you to walk through this with me. Likewise are there relationships you have where people might be willing to say to you, look, it just seems like you're stuck. I'm concerned about some of the decisions or choices you're making and how can I help? I think when we're aware that we live in a combat zone, it should shape how we engage one another.

So here's what Paul is highlighting, he says, Look, I want you to see., I want you to see these problems, right? First of all, he says, Look, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Be led by the Spirit. And you are not under the law. So he acknowledges, look, here are two ways you can get off track. Right on the one hand, you can see, you're gonna seek to measure up and keep the law, but he said you need to understand that as a believer, you have been freed from that. On the other hand, he said you can simply allow all those desires, the desires of the flesh, the desires that turn you towards selfishness, and turn your love inward, all of that, you can allow that to go unchecked and you can simply live under the flesh. But he says both of these are off the path. You can go off the path this way, you can go off the path that way.

So what's the solution? Well, notice it's not just try harder. The solution is not will power. The solution, he says, is walk by the Spirit. And Paul uses different phrases in this passage to communicate that. He talks about, he says, walk by the Spirit, be led by the Spirit, live by the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit. And what he's saying is this, look, you've been called to this freedom, so stand firm in it. Christ has set you free, but he hasn't simply freed you from the external restraint of the law, he's also freed you from the internal bondage of the flesh. So walk in that freedom. Because when the Son sets you free, you're free indeed. And when he talks about walking in the Spirit, and we're gonna see more of this as we go throughout these letters, but when he talks about walking in the spirit, of keeping step with the Spirit, I think he's encouraging us to make room for the Spirit of God to be at work.

And for us today, it includes building into our pattern of life, just patterns and rhythms that invite the Spirit to be at work in our lives. This is why with this series were encouraging you to use this devotional guide to get into God's Word, but not only to get into God's Word, but to be open to

engage him in prayer as we go through these different sections. Because as you do that in different ways, I think you will see how the Spirit is wanting to continue to deepen your understanding of what it means to live as a follower of Christ. And as he does that in different ways, he is liberating you from potentially the weightiness of being under the law, and he is liberating you from ways in which the flesh can seek to pull you in unhealthy desires and directions. So Paul says, walk by the Spirit.

And of course, as you read in this passage as the Spirit works, Paul describes some of the things he will develop in our lives. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. And notice, so many of those are relational. And what Paul is saying is, Look, it is the work of the Spirit to move you beyond yourself. If the flesh seeks to turn you inward, the desires of the flesh turn you inward, so I'm always just focusing on myself or they're concerns about myself, that the work of the Spirit is to move you beyond that. In the freedom that only Christ can give.

And notice also Paul describes these things as the fruit of God's work in me. It's not something I just must do on my own, but it's opening my life to the ongoing work of the Spirit. Opening my life to the ongoing work of the spirit in things like scripture and prayer. Opening my life to the ongoing work of the Spirit just in the relationships that I share with people who are so the same journey with me. Opening my life to the ongoing work of the Spirit as I become aware of opportunities God is kind of inviting me into to serve or to share or to invest myself and other relationships. And as I'm willing to engage these opportunities, I'm on this journey of walking with the Spirit. So Paul says this, you can get off track here, you can get off that track to there, but what I wanna show you, and this really will become a theme of his letters in a different, I'm want to show you how to walk, I'm wanna show you how to walk in the Spirit. So live in that freedom, live in that freedom.

Having said that, talking about making room for the Spirit, I wanna do that in a particular way this morning. And I wanna lead us in the time of prayer before we turn to a time of communion. And what I wanna do is just lead us in a time of confession. So I'm gonna ask you, would you just bow with me right now. And as you do that, listen to these words from the Psalmist, Psalm 139. Search me O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there's any offensive way in me and lead me in the way, everlasting. As you hear these words, sometimes I think, maybe in times of prayer, we kind of, maybe we just kinda say, God forgive me in my sins and we move on. But the Psalmist is inviting us to be open to the deeper work of the Spirit. And so would you just kind of pray those words right now: Search me, O God. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there's any offensive way in me. And would you just kinda come before God right now, just open your life, your heart to the work of the Spirit to say, Father, what do I need to be aware of? Maybe there are just certain ways, certain fears or unhealthy thoughts that have taken root in your life and you're just gotten accustomed to it. Maybe there's a relationship that right now you're just not handling well, and you've kinda gotten stuck in a rut. Maybe there's some values that have really taken hold in your life that are unhealthy or outside God's best for your life right now, and maybe they're just certain patterns of interaction or behavior or thinking that are really moving you in the wrong direction. So Father, right now, would you just search our hearts and just be open to what the spirit might bring to your heart and mind. And if there really are certain things that come to mind now, there may not be, but if there are, would you just bring them before God and acknowledge, and confess. And having acknowledged those things in confession, listen to these words from 1 John. If we confess our sins, he's faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. So just take a moment to acknowledge that you've been forgiven. Thank, thank him for the gift of his forgiveness and grace.

So Father, we thank you for the freedom that Jesus offers. We thank you that through the work of Christ, we can truly live a life in which we walk with the Spirit. Perhaps for some of us this morning in deep ways, we need to understand and receive that forgiveness in particular areas of our lives. And I pray that we would do that right now, in Jesus' name, Amen.

And now to acknowledge that work of forgiveness, we're going to come to this time of communion. A time when we celebrate the freedom that we have through the work of Christ. And for those of you who may have yet to start this journey, even as we've been talking about this freedom, know that the freedom that Paul is talking about in this passage is a freedom that is offered to you. It is a freedom, the freedom of this new life, the freedom of forgiveness, the freedom of walking with the Spirit, it is a freedom that we experience as we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. And if you don't know what that means. We'd love to tell you more about what it looks like to be a follower.