

Walk The Line

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[0 : 0 0] because to turn today to Galatians chapter 5, Galatians chapter 5, and we'll be looking at the section we read from verse 16 actually through to verse 25, and we'll also be looking at that, our house groups on Wednesday evening.

Now for those of us who have been looking at Galatians, we're seeing how significant Galatians is because from the very outset of this letter that Paul's writing, the Gospel is at stake in that church.

The Gospel is under threat, and so Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, defends the Gospel very powerfully because he cares about the freedom of the Gospel.

He cares that the Gospel is protected because it's not just something that is malleable and changeable, but is true and genuine, and if we depart from it, then he sees and God sees that we return to slavery spiritually speaking.

So he speaks very powerfully in defence of the Gospel. You know, it's almost like he can't understand why people would want to retract from the Gospel into something else.

[1 : 2 6] It's a bit like a butterfly trying to hack off its wings in order to squeeze back into its chrysalis. No, I want to return to the constrictions of the cocoon.

I want to return to the smallness and the darkness of the chrysalis, and I don't want to be free. I don't want to fly with the wings and the beauty that I've been given, and I want to go back to that condition.

That is what Paul sees, the danger here of denying the Gospel, that the church of the Christian community in Galatia were returning to darkness and to slavery, and kind of cutting off the Gospel wings that Christ had given them.

And the Gospel is always under threat. It's under threat from your own heart and from my own heart. We struggle with the freedom of the Gospel, and it's under threat all around us, and so the relevance of this book is always real.

And we're going to look at a little bit of what Paul speaks about here with regard to freedom, as he explains a little bit more about Gospel freedom. What does it look like?

[2 : 4 5] And there's a few things that I just want to pick out from this passage that help explain to us what Gospel freedom looks like. And it clearly involves a rebirth.

We know that from the whole of the New Testament teaching, no less from Jesus himself and John 3, where he speaks a lot about in the language of renewal or rebirth.

And he says to Nicodemus, he shouldn't be surprised at me saying, you must be born again. And he says that every believer is reborn in Galatians 4.

And in verse 6, where we've already looked at, he says, you know, God has sent his spirit into our hearts. And that's the language of rebirth.

I mean, the language that Jesus used in John 3 is about the light of the world coming. And people reject that very often and would prefer the darkness. But his light comes into our hearts and we are reborn by his spirit.

[3 : 46] We're given new life. Jesus comes into our heart by our spirit and it is a renewal. And we become spiritually alive and our sins are dealt with. So there is rebirth.

And that clearly comes across in this, particularly at the first, well, really the whole section, because the whole section is charismatic.

Seven times the Holy Spirit is mentioned in this passage when he's speaking about the Christian life. So it's clearly a spiritual rebirth in which the Holy Spirit is significant.

Every Christian is baptized in the Spirit. Every Christian is anointed in the Spirit. Every Christian is filled with the Spirit. We have the Spirit of God in our lives.

The Spirit of life, the Spirit of power, the Spirit of truth. The Spirit who testifies with our own spirit, who frees us up to understand and to know God, to be forgiven.

[4 : 48] And to have the inevitability of spiritual brokenness and sin broken in our lives. So we have this rebirth which is clearly charismatic where we've asked Jesus into our hearts and he's given us his Spirit.

And this rebirth is one that... It makes our hearts touched. It touches our hearts with God's love.

5 verse 14 speaks, Paul speaks about it powerfully. The entire law is summed up in this command, love your neighbour as yourself, as it summarises the whole of the law, which is love, Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself.

And so this rebirth is a rebirth of desire, rebirth in our heart, which simply changes everything.

It is a rebirth that changes everything. Our experience of God, our understanding of God, our understanding of ourselves, of the Bible, of worship, of obedience, we come to the place where we want God.

[6 : 03] Where we love God, where we want His Lordship and we want His grace, and we see things differently because we've been touched by His love. That's the driven motivation and the miraculous change that takes place.

It can't be manufactured, it isn't made up. It is that renewal and rebirth as we come to Him by faith. So this passage as it speaks about the Spirit and all the different aspects of the Spirit reminds us of rebirth in terms of freedom, not dissimilar to the butterfly coming out of the cocoon and being as it were reborn in beauty and in freedom.

However, the passage also clearly speaks about conflict, that freedom involves conflict. Boo! I hear you say under your breath. Conflict, surely not.

We don't like that kind of language. We love all the truth about Jesus and we love peace and we love love and we love joy but we're not so keen on this whole concept of conflict. What is that to do with peace and love? Is it not antithetical to the gospel? But in this world, even as we read the newspapers, we recognize that if there is to be national peace, it often involves the restraint of evil, doesn't it?

It involves not simply a positive reality of enjoying peace, but it means that evil needs to be restrained. Now, we don't want to get into politics at any level, but you see that happening on a world scale, whether we agree rightly or wrongly with the interventions that different countries make. But when some nations see the build-up of nuclear arms in North Korea, then they get worried that peace is at stake because there's an instability in that country.

[8 : 11] And with love also, love always in this world involves a resistance of hate. There's always a two-sidedness to it. I heard a great quote recently, I remember when it comes from, where someone said, isn't it amazing how much hate there is at anti-hate rallies? I don't really know what that's got to do with any others. An interesting thought to think about that when people are on anti-hate rallies, there seems to be an awful lot of venom at them.

And where there is love, we also recognize that hate needs to be restrained and the butterfly that flies so beautifully around in freedom and in beauty also as predators, is conflict. And so we recognize, and this passage speaks very clearly about conflict. You know, in verse 17, the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the spirit and the spirit, what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other.

And Paul, they are speaking primarily, internally, he's not speaking about national issues, but speaking primarily about spiritual conflict internally within us. And this and many other passages of scripture make this truth very real, the reality of conflict.

So much so that it's easier sometimes for us not to be Christians. Do you think that sometimes? How much easier would it be in my life just not to be a Christian? Because of the conflict, because of the conscience battles, because of the struggles and the difficulties.

Friends that don't know Jesus, they seem to have life so much easier. I thought becoming a Christian would make things easier, but there just seems to be so much conflict. It's the whole kind of institutionalized thing about prisoners that sometimes they're so used to being institutionalized and being decisions being made for them that when they hit the freedom of being released, that they can't cope with that freedom and they long for their prison cell again. Because every other decisions are being made for them and so in Christ that can often be the case.

[10 : 20] We would rather just not have that battle and the freedom and the joy and the cost of that freedom in our lives. It's easier to give up, maybe you're tempted today to give up.

Who likes battle? Who likes conflict? But it's very real in the Christian because there's a conflict between this new nature, this spiritual nature that is gifted to us by God and our own sinful human natures which resist God.

So there's this, as long as we're alive in this world, there is this conflict and this tension. And I say not, don't be discouraged if you have that. Don't feel you're alone, don't feel you're unique and every other Christian seems to have it together but you've got this internal battle and struggle about believing and not believing, about doubt and about belief, about evil and right, but good and bad.

That is part of what it is to be a Christian. It's a great encouragement that there's conflict in your heart. It's a sign of God's spirit working there. And we all face that. Redemption, you see, goes deep, goes deep into our heart. If your life has no internal conflict, if there's no battle between God and between your own life and your own thinking, then there's no reason to be alarmed there.

There's that, it's that price of healing as God works in us because what we desire and what God wants for us are often in conflict. And remember also that within that conflict there's only one winner because Jesus at the end of speaking about the acts of the sinful nature goes on to say those who live like that will not inherit the kingdom of God.

[12 : 05] So he's speaking there about victory and a future and an inheritance that the future is for those who remain in Christ and who don't give up in the battle and the struggle and who know and who increasingly recognise their sinful nature being defeated.

This battle, this conflict, this contrariness is temporary. Choose life, choose Christ, choose God and see that battle outworking in our lives.

So it speaks of them as being charismatic and it speaks also of conflict. And I think as we recognise that we need to reflect on the Bible and the Bible's teaching in this passage as a result of that.

We need to reflect that the Bible knows our hearts. It's an incredible book as God's living word, it knows our hearts. It's just like that mirror into our soul. That's sometimes why we close it, isn't it? No, it's just too real. It just knows me.

It knows what I'm like, it knows my heart. It's relentlessly honest, which is why we don't like it sometimes. It's why the temptation is to chop out the bits we don't like. Well, I'm not having that bit, we just chop it out and get rid of it and we make whatever reason we make for it.

[13 : 32] We don't allow it to interpret itself. We don't allow it to breathe because there's a conflict with what we would rather it say.

But it knows our hearts. It reflects our hearts and it never then is out of date. Let it mould us. Let it speak to us.

Let it guide us. It's a good book. It's God's living word. It's his testimony to us. Know our hearts through the word, but also know God through his word. It's his objective revelation of himself for us. You know Christ himself in John 10, 35 says, of the Old Testament, Scripture cannot be broken.

So he recognizes it as something that is not to be dissected and taken apart. He himself reveals himself as God in the flesh.

So what we have about Jesus is a revelation of God in him and we know also that he revealed his truth to his apostles as we have in the New Testament.

[14 : 47] You know Paul makes that very strongly, that argument very strongly in Galatians 1, 12. You know he doesn't want people to think it's just my own gospel that I've made up over a few years. He says I did not receive it from any man nor was I taught it.

Rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. That's his own stand on this matter, that he receives the gospel and the gospel is from God. And so here we have God opening up to us a passage about conflict and God expressing to us the kind of areas in which we find conflict with himself. And I'm not going to go into these lists that are given, we could discuss that more at the house groups, but maybe the areas of conflict they divide themselves into sex, religion, society and drunkenness or appetite. You know he talks about sexual liminality, impurity, debauchery, semi-colon, idolatry and witchcraft, semi-colon, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, semi-colon and then drunkenness orges. And he kind of just adds that and alike. This is not an exhaustive list but we maybe could split into the four areas. Four areas where there is conflict that

God exposes in our hearts. Very real, very honest, ones we tend to shy away from often in our lives and our hearts and our thoughts.

Surely God doesn't apply to these areas. He says well yeah. And also he speaks about the areas where our new hearts are to be changed when he gives us that passage on the fruits of the spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These two can be areas that we could maybe split up in our attitude to God, our attitude to each other and a recognition of our own characters and natures changing to become more Christ-like.

So the Bible encourages us to know our own hearts and to know God as he reveals himself and it's good to reflect on that, to reflect on the nature of what God is saying. And it's a reminder to us that so often in Christ we are unconventional, non-conformists, that we are walking on a different road and a different path as we have been renewed and refreshed.

[17 : 33] We have traditionally and up to this day or we hope to be radical in our faith. We're not those who simply go along with everything our hearts think and everything everybody around us tells us but rather that we recognize God, we recognize our own hearts and we live differently.

You know which fits in so beautifully with the passage and Colossians we're looking at which says just by our lives we don't need to run and rave and preach and wear sandwich boards and everything like that. We simply need to live our lives and as we do so our lives should be beautiful and should present us with opportunities to share with people why our lives are different. Maybe people don't think they're beautiful but they certainly ought to be different.

And the tendency in our own heart is always just to be conformists isn't it? It's just to be as like everybody else and to make God as like us rather than to let him speak for himself and breathe for himself and for us to follow him.

So there is a degree of biblical reflection and lastly in this section the encouragement of freedom which seems paradoxical is to walk the line to quote my great old friend Johnny Cash is to walk the line in verse 25 we have that whole injunction there at the end of the section you know since we live by the Spirit or since we walk by the Spirit same word let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let's keep in step with the Spirit. Walk the line.

The idea of being close being faithful to the standard who is Christ the person who is Christ this is our responsibility to walk the line great encouragement for us to be faithful in our lives you know keep in step with the Spirit. Walk in the line it's been faithful to God as he is revealed himself to. Faithful to God in our hearts primarily this is about us it's not about anything else it's about us it's about our lives it's about living in relationship with Jesus Christ and being faithful to the one who was faithful to us to the cross in his love and his grace and it's that childlike humble walking of the line because we love him and he has changed our lives and he's redeemed us and he says free and he encourages us then to have been living by the Spirit walking by the Spirit keeping step with him that's our privilege that's our responsibility well actually I think it is maybe both because there's he speaks earlier in the section in verse 18 of being led by the Spirit now that's a very passive verb that's being used there that we are led by the

[21 : 02] Spirit in other words that we it's much more passive where we recognize his sovereignty where we recognize his strength and his power and we in a childlike way come in behind him and we let him guide us and we give ourselves so you know people see phrase I've never really liked like go and let God or something like that you know where we passively let God lead us now there's a very real aspect I guess although I don't like the phrase of that in terms of recognizing who God is and his power and his glory but there's also this very active responsibility we're not just passive so that when things go wrong get wrong it's God's fault but there's this active responsibility here that's a very active verb that let us keep in step with the Spirit let us walk the line our responsibility you see we're spiritually alive now we're not dead we no longer can say oh well it's just my sinful nature because we've been brought alive and we'll be free and we can do what is right because Christ has given us life and power so we have responsibility to do what's right as

Christians in our lives and that has negative and positive implications doesn't it negatively it involves crucifying the sinful nature in verse 24 those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires that's simply the language of self discipline self control mark 8:34 Jesus says if anyone would come after me he must deny himself take up his cross and follow me same language exactly the same language it's a language of self denial and that negatively is what is part of what's involved in being Christian that's self denial our standard has changed we deny what we've naturally taken to be the law of our lives and in these areas sexuality religion relationships pleasure and the like Jesus says there is a standard that reflects him and his nature and his creative design for us and we all practice self control whether we like it or not in our lives we all do it we all practice self control to a greater or lesser degree whether it's in our marriage faithfulness whether it's in our study for exams whether it's in our discipline at job and jobs coming in on time leaving on time doing what we're asked whether it's our submission to political correctness whatever it is you know we have a standard of self control in our lives so it's not a question of I don't like this language of self control because we all are engaged in it but rather who's standard are we modelling our self control on is it just ourselves what is it on Jesus Christ it's the one who truly loves us and truly knows us so it speaks negatively about controlling our passions and our desires which are counter Christ counter his love and his grace and his character but also positively and I'm so glad to finish on this positive note that there is this walking the line this keeping in step with the spirit positively that we bear the fruit of the spirit that we show that our lives belong to God how do we know how do others know how do we know that we are Christians because our hearts bear the fruit of the spirit it's quite simple it's an indication of our spirits having been changed and we're not alone in that we don't need to look at the love joy peace patient I'm not very sure how good I am I must try harder but there's this sense in which we look at these and say oh spirit of God please enable me to show these in my life more they're your gifts they're your characteristics confirm my faith by enabling me to go beyond myself and live in this way this beautiful way he gives us the power he gives us the strength he is just so willing he's hanging out of heaven waiting for us to ask for him to help us to live his way he longs for us to do that it's that freedom she says what is it's a freedom not to fail it's the freedom to be like God without the burden of feeling that it's all in my own strength I have to do it it's the freedom of not giving into the inevitability of my nature and of my maybe greed or jealousy or selfishness or self-centeredness is allowing ourselves to become beautiful and whole by his grace

and by his strength not to be imprisoned by our birth or by our genes our genetic makeup becoming beautiful and whole and useful and free in his kingdom see that is why Paul and under the inspiration of God cares so much here because for him the gospel is not something that's malleable and changeable as life goes on the danger of returning as the people were there to legalism taking a bit of the gospel a bit of Jesus but also circumcision and the old testament law and everything that went with it they wanted that but it was returning them to slavery it's not up for grabs it's not up for reinterpretation because the gospel is real and Christ achieved and Christ gifts and we grab hold of that freedom and we allow ourselves to live our lives in the light of it and reflect his nature in our lives and battle against the the passions and the desires that turn us from Christ there is nothing more honest than God's word sometimes nothing more uncomfortable than God's word always nothing more hopeful than God's word because it shows us freedom and freedom with an eternal perspective and we rejoice in that and I hope that on Wednesday or Tuesday or

Wednesday when we're looking at that together we'll be able to discuss some of these issues in a a fuller way but i do hope that we are all challenged by the conflict by the the newness of life and by all that is discussed in this passage let's bow our heads in prayer heavenly father we thank you for your word we thank you for its honesty we thank you that when we get up in the morning and we struggle to think about our christian faith and we're weary of the battle and we're fed up with not seeing our lives progress and we constantly face opposition both internally and sometimes externally in the secular world in which we live and our temptation is just simply to walk away we thank you that you know and you understand we thank you that that is normal and natural in our lives from the greatest saint that we may look up to to the newest babe in christ and we thank you that that is something from which we've been promised victory and strength and power to overcome not in ourselves not with a a kind of doger dogged determinism but with a balanced being led and walking in your paths help us to do that we pray lord give us that insight and that balance and forgive us when we lose sight of your love and in so doing we find that everything is distorted lord return to us we pray that great desire that we we long for that we dream of that we imagine and that you promise that you will give us beyond our wildest dreams and our imaginings so that our attitude to you and ourselves and the world in which we live and your word and worship and obedience may all be changed as it stems from a heart that's been broken and healed and filled with love for you so help us we pray help us as we seek to help each other as we seek to hold each other up encourage one another and strengthen one another and pray for one another love one another and we pray that you would guide us and lead us in these paths lord redeem us we ask and continue to give us a sense of your freshness in

Jesus name amen