



Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Chapter 5, Verses 13 - 26

by Tim Kelley

At the beginning of this chapter Paul began to wind this letter down. His frustration at seeing the Galatian congregations entertain the idea that Jewish identity was as important, or even more important than faith in the prophesied sacrifice of Messiah Yeshua, was beginning to subside. Instead of giving example after example of how righteousness in God's eyes comes by faith, Paul began to show them the ramifications of trying to obtain justification by law – specifically a Jewish oral tradition.

As he continued to close his thoughts, and assuming that they will eventually discard the “other gospel” being promoted by the perpetrators¹, he began to remind them that they still have to get along with their Jewish brothers. He started by again quoting from the Torah.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 5:13-14** For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!

Just as he did in verse 1 thru 3 of this chapter, Paul again reminded the non-Jewish believers that they had been called out of the bondage that had isolated them from their Jewish brothers and alienated them from greater Israel for the past 700 years. The liberty they now enjoyed did not come by way of submission to a man-made tradition, but by their redemption through the blood of Messiah Yeshua. With that fact firmly established, Paul then warned them to not use that freedom to turn around and attack their Jewish brothers by denouncing their traditions.

In verse 13, the Greek word for “opportunity” (NKJ) and “occasion” (KJV) is the word “aphorme” (‘af-or-mayh’ – Strong’s 874). It’s a compound of the words “apo” (Strong’s 575) which means “separation” as in “separating a part from the whole”, and the word “hormao” (Strong’s 3729) which means “to set in rapid motion, to stir up, incite, to rush”. According to Strong’s, “aphorme” is “a place from which an attack is made”.

Let’s apply this meaning to a couple of the seven places we see “aphorme” in the New Testament –

^{NKJ} **Romans 7:8** But sin, ~~taking opportunity~~ *having a place from which to attack* by the commandment, produced in me all ~~manner of evil~~ desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.

^{NKJ} **Romans 7:11** For sin, ~~taking occasion~~ *having a place from which to attack* by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed *me*.

In the traditional rendering of these passages it appears that the commandments are causing Paul to sin, but by using the correct definition of “aphorme” the understanding is more in tune with the context, i.e. when he properly understood the commandment, he recognized that he was being attacked by a deception that led to sin.

Taking that same definition and putting it in our Galatians text, it would read – “. . . do not *use* liberty as ~~an opportunity~~ *for as a place from which to attack* the flesh . . .”, with the “flesh” being the oral tradition - the thought that you can gain acceptance by God as a result of your own works (Gal. 3:3). In other

¹ Galatians 5:10

words, Paul is admonishing the non-Jews to not flaunt their freedom from the oral law which might further separate the congregation. Instead, he encouraged them to love their brothers with the same love (agape) YHVH has for His people. This might include giving respect to the Jewish tradition in regards to synagogue conduct and refraining from conduct that might be offensive to the Jews.

Paul addressed this in his letter to the Corinthians when he said –

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 10:23** All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.

Instead of being offensive by your otherwise “lawful” actions, observe the words of Yeshua, which are in turn one of the most basic teachings of the Torah -

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 19:18** 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I *am* the LORD.

The Jews in Galatia must come to realize that the oral tradition is just that – tradition, but at the same time, the non-Jews need to understand that those traditions are deeply rooted, and in many cases – are lawful by the Torah. And in both cases, the believers (both Jew and non-Jew) must come to see that in God's eyes, they are all equal. If each group goes out of its way to accommodate the other, they can then worship, study, and work together in peace. Otherwise the congregation might destroy its self, which in Paul's view – is not an option.

So how do they avoid self destruction? By walking in the Spirit!

^{NKJ} **Galatians 5:16-18** I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law..

These next few passages are a little difficult to understand. Many commentaries say that Paul shifted gears at this point in his letter and began to contrast a spirit filled life with a life based on Torah observance, and though this is in some ways correct, I believe it misses the point that Paul is trying to make. As Peter said in his epistle, Paul's letters are sometimes hard to understand, but if you use his own words to interpret his letters, they become a little clearer.

Let's begin to decipher Paul's statement by reiterating the purpose for this letter in the first place –

In the most basic terms, the purpose of this letter was to contrast two different ways of obtaining righteousness² – faith in YHVH and faith in your own works. I'm going to call them “faith-based righteousness” and “works-based righteousness”. Paul showed the Galatians that they had been found righteous in God's eyes and had thus been joined back to the body of believers because of their faith in the sacrifice of Messiah Yeshua. His sacrifice was a fulfillment of the words of the prophets which told of a day when YHVH would cause His people to return back to Him and His Torah. Thus faith that Yeshua's sacrifice fulfilled the words of the prophets (faith-based righteousness) illustrated trust in the word, character, and name of YHVH.

On the other hand, Paul showed that if a person were to attempt to obtain righteousness by his own works - which in the case of the Galatian controversy was to submit to the notion that a person must convert to Judaism (works-based righteousness) as shown by ritual circumcision - he would fail because if obedience to a code of law makes one righteous, no one can be righteous because all have sinned.

² Becoming acceptable to God.

With Paul's purpose in mind, what we see him doing in these verses is to simply carry that contrast further. Paul was simply contrasting the spiritual walk with that of one who attempts to gain righteousness by his own works. Let's examine this more closely by defining what it means to be "in the spirit" -

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a teacher of the Jewish people, came to Yeshua one night inquiring about His teachings, to which Yeshua answered that if he wanted to understand these things he would have to become spiritually minded. Yeshua went on to say –

^{NKJ} **John 3:5-6** "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

In this passage Yeshua makes it clear that there are two different ways of understanding, fleshly and spiritual. To illustrate what it means to be spiritually minded, Yeshua likened Himself to the image of the fiery serpent that Moses had put on a pole and lifted up above the people so that those who looked upon it would be saved from their sin. He told Nicodemus –

^{NKJ} **John 3:14-15** "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

In the story of the fiery serpent, the people had once again been bad-mouthing Moses and YHVH, so YHVH sent fiery serpents among the people. When they began to die from snakebites, the Israelites came to Moses and repented – confessing their sin. YHVH then instructed Moses to fashion a serpent and put it on a pole, then told the Israelites that if they looked toward the serpent, they would be healed.³ For the Israelite who had been bitten by a serpent, life or death depended upon him trusting the words of Moses and turning his eyes toward the serpent on the pole.

In the story, Israel had to repent and look toward the image on the pole if they were going to be saved from their sin. There was nothing they could do on their own to save themselves . . . they had to look to the serpent on the pole. Thus Yeshua showed Nicodemus the Pharisee that what distinguishes a spiritual person from a fleshly person is repentance and belief.

Let's apply this understanding to Paul's statement in verses 16 – 18.

The first thing we need to see is that the King James Version is a little too intense. The word translated "lust" is "epithumia" (Strong's 1939) and though it's translated "lust" 39 times in the KJV, its meaning is more along the lines of "turning to" and "longing for". A better English word would be "desire", and that's the word the English Standard Version uses –

^{ESV} **Galatians 5:16-17** But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

So we see that fleshly desires and spiritual desires are opposites, but if one has a spiritual walk, it's less likely he will also have a fleshly walk. Interjecting the context of Paul's teaching and the relationship between "spirit" and belief (faith)⁴ into these verses, we could say it this way –

^{TLK Version} **Galatians 5:16-17** But I say, walk by **faith-based righteousness**, and you will not gratify the desires of **works-based righteousness**. ¹⁷For the desires of the **works-based righteousness** are against **faith-based righteousness**, and the desires of **faith-based**

³ Numbers 21:4-9. We don't know for sure that the image was that of a serpent. The Hebrew word is "seraph" (שֶׂרָפִים – 8314) which can mean "fiery", "serpent", or "angelic being". The root word of "seraph" means "burn".

⁴ "belief" and "faith" are interchangeable words, both being derived from the Greek "pistis" (Strong's 4102)

righteousness are against **works-based righteousness**, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

What are the desires of “works based righteousness”? More Works! And what do works require? More laws! If a person can become righteous by his works, when has he performed enough works? It's a never-ending spiral that leads to death because a person can never do enough to make up for that one sin that he's committed, for we know that –

^{NKJ} **Romans 3:23** . . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

and -

^{NKJ} **Romans 6:23** . . . the wages of sin *is* death . . .

On the other hand, the desires of “faith righteousness” is to know more about the one you believe in. Think about it . . . are you going to put your life in the hands of someone you know little or nothing about? Would you buy car insurance from someone standing on a street corner saying he'll insure your car if you give him some money? No way! When you buy insurance, you want to know that the insurance company is legitimate . . . that it has a track record of paying its claims . . . that it's not going to just vanish away when you need it most.

If we're basing righteousness on faith in Yeshua, we need to know that He's for real . . . that He's done what He's said He's done, and that He can do what He's said He'll do. Thus Peter says –

^{ESV} **2 Peter 3:18** . . . grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As we can see, the desires of faith-based righteousness are quite different than those of works-based righteousness.

Going back to verse 15 we see that we're to “walk” in the spirit, or as I've termed it “faith-based righteousness”. How do we “walk” in the spirit? To understand, we need to understand “halacha”.

In Hebrew thought God's people are on a journey, and their course in life is defined by their “halacha”.

Halacha is a Hebrew word that means “the way to go”. It comes from the Hebrew word “halach” (הלך) – Strong's 1980) which means “to walk”. A person's halacha is to be defined by the Torah. Even before the Torah was formally given to Israel, Jethro told Moses –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 18:20** "And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.

To walk in God's ways and to keep his Torah is the core teaching of God and the prophets. The Tnakh is filled with promises to those who will walk in the ways of God, and as He promises to restore Israel in the end of days, He says that He will –

^{NKJ} **Ezekiel 36:26-27** “ . . . give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”

According to Ezekiel's prophecy, a walk in the spirit is a walk in the Torah. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says that Yeshua's follower walk in the Spirit as opposed to walking in the flesh (Romans 8:1). So what Paul told the Galatians was that their “walk” should resemble the Torah-based “walk” of the Messiah, a much different “walk” that what was prescribed by the Pharisees and those who promoted the oral law as a means to becoming righteous.

Yeshua came to make the walk straight and easy as was prophesied by Isaiah and preached by John the Baptist -

^{NKJ} **Luke 3:4-5** . . . 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth;

Yeshua's walk was going to be strait and level . . . no steep hills to climb, not sharp turns to make. On the other hand the walk of the Jewish leaders was quite difficult. Instead of teaching that one should walk in God's way – His Torah, they taught that the walk – the halacha – was defined by their own rules –

^{NKJ} **Mark 7:5-8** Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?" ⁶ And He answered and said to them ⁷ . . . in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. ⁸ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men . . ."

The walk that Paul wanted the Galatians to follow . . . the walk that would sustain the congregation . . . must be a "spiritual" walk that's grounded in written Torah, not in the tradition of the elders. That's not to say that they should throw out all the traditions; but that they should treat the traditions for what they are . . . traditions.

If they adopt Yeshua and His Torah based walk as their guide, they then – according to Moses and the prophets – have come out from under the curse of the law.

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 30:1-3** "Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call *them* to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God drives you, ² "and you return to the LORD your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, ³ "that the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 5:19-21** ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

In this passage, Paul listed the characteristics of those who define their righteousness by their works – specifically the oral law. Yeshua gave a similar list in Mark 7 when He debated the Pharisees in regards to the tradition of washing hands⁵ as well as when he described those who make a show of their "works-based" righteousness.⁶ The point he was making here was that "works-based" righteousness only brings a reward in this life by receiving praise from men. Yeshua illustrated this in Matthew 6 -

^{NKJ} **Matthew 6:1** "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. . . . ⁵ " And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites . . . Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward . . . ¹⁶ " Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance . . . Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward."

Whereas those who put their faith in themselves in many cases succumb to deviant behavior⁷, those who

⁵ In Matthew 15:9-20 Yeshua more clearly relates this list to the Pharisees

⁶ Mark 12:38-40

⁷ When religion adds to God's law, it often results in complete lawlessness and/or deviant behavior. For example: many of the Jewish people in Israel have completely abandoned God and His Torah based on

base their righteousness on faith in God and His promises are more likely to enjoy happiness in their life.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 5:22-23** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

The result of a faith-based walk was discussed by Yeshua on the evening before his death where he showed his disciples that if they continue to walk in His way and teach others about the salvation that's available by His sacrifice, they will walk in joy even during times of trial and despair -

^{NKJ} **John 15:7-11** ⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. ⁹ " As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and *that* your joy may be full.

The joy that the disciples enjoyed came from the same spiritual "faith-based" walk that Paul prescribed for the Galatians, and it's the same walk that would lead to peace in the congregation.

Paul's statement "against such there is no law" is somewhat puzzling, but put into context we can see that all he was doing was taking a friendly jab at the perpetrators – those who promote oral law. The Jews have a law that applies to just about everything – putting on tzit-tzit, when to kneel, when not to kneel, and on, and on. Since Paul was contrasting the righteousness of faith as opposed to the righteousness of works, what he did here was to simply (and somewhat sarcastically) state that even the Jews don't have a law that governs joy and happiness.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 5:24-26** And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Referencing back to what he said earlier in the letter ⁸, Paul reiterated that all those in the congregation – both Jew and non-Jew - had been immersed in the death of the Messiah and were then supposed to be new men, living a life that that is based on Messiah living in them.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 2:20** "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Therefore, if they were living a spiritual life, their walk should reflect it. They should set aside their own desires – including that of exalting one group over another. There again, Paul referenced, or at least hinted toward, the words of the prophets –

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 11:13** Also the envy of Ephraim shall depart, And the adversaries of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not envy Judah, And Judah shall not harass Ephraim.

So this part of Paul's letter was to direct them toward a "spiritual" walk as their primary objective, while at the same time being respectful to each other's background. By doing so, he hoped to bring peace and stability to the congregation.

the fact that the rabbis have made it so difficult with their oral traditions. In Christian circles, when a man-made law such as celibacy for church leaders is enacted, many of those who are subject to that law turn to pornography and child molestation.

⁸ Gal. 2:20

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Paul continues the letter to the Galatians by addressing some of the points found in Leviticus 19 to which he had previously referred. We'll take that up the next time.

In review:

- Though Paul is confident that most of the Galatians will abandon the "other gospel" of the perpetrators, he fears that the problem may eventually divide the congregation, therefore
- He instructs them to walk foremost within the instructions of the written Torah, which if they do so
- Will accentuate joy and godly love within the fellowship

Shalom Alecheim