Paul Harvey had a wonderful way of telling stories. He led you along thinking you knew exactly where he was headed, and then before you knew what hit you, he would introduce a surprise ending with the phrase, “And now for the rest of the story . . .”

In a sense that's what the Apostle Paul does here in Galatians. For five chapters he has been denouncing legalism and pressing home the amazing freedom we have in Christ. Now just as we are about to accept the truth of our amazing freedom, and perhaps even conclude that we can throw off all the restraints put on us by parents, church, and society, he hits us with these words from Galatians 5:13, “You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature.”

And some of you may be saying to yourself, “I knew it was too good to be true; I knew there had to be some catch.” I hope you don't see it that way. I hope you can work with me through these last two chapters and see that they do not really contradict the early chapters but rather provide an important balance in an area where it is so very easy to lose one's balance.

Let’s read our text for this morning, verses 13-18:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For 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, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

I want to explain this passage by means of five simple propositions.

**Christian freedom walks a fine line between legalism on the one hand and moral anarchy on the other.**

Legalism was defined in Gal. 5:1 as “a yoke of slavery.” The opposite is referred to in verse 13 as “using your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” Both are dangerous. There’s no question that legalism has done a number on many Christians, particularly those from conservative, traditional backgrounds. But friends, let’s be honest about it. Moral anarchy is at least as great a threat. Sometimes it’s called license or libertarianism or antinomianism (which is a big word which simply means “anti-law”). Whatever you call it, unless you’re living in a cocoon, you are
confronted with it on every hand—in advertising, politics, education, the social sciences, you name it.

To be frank, friends, I suspect there is probably less danger today of Christians failing to enjoy their freedom in Christ because of legalism, than there is in going too far with their freedom by gratifying the desires of the sinful nature. What God wants is for us to enjoy freedom without either legalism or license.

One of the problems we face, unfortunately, is that “freedom” is one of those words whose meaning has shifted a great deal. Whereas freedom of the press used to mean the right to print the truth without governmental harassment, it is now used by many to refer to the right to publish pornography, military secrets, and total distortions of the truth.

Whereas freedom of choice used to mean that each person should have the right to decide the course of his own life (so long as it didn't impinge upon someone else's freedom), it now means to some that a mother has the freedom to rid herself of an unwanted child, irrespective of the baby's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Freedom of religion used to mean that the state could pass no laws favoring a particular religion or denying the free exercise of any religion. Now it seems to mean freedom from all religious influence or even exposure to religion in government, schools, and public institutions (unless, of course, it’s some state-approved religion, like humanism, or evolution, or environmentalism).

Paul saw the potential for the same distortion in regard to our freedom in Christ. Whereas Christian freedom is, in fact, a beautiful concept—expressing our release from the deadening demands of the Law—he knew some would take it as synonymous with freedom from all moral restraint. He knew there were grave risks, so he takes pains to warn us in today’s text that . . .

**Christian freedom is not freedom to indulge one’s sinful nature. (13a,17)**

Most social scientists today want us to believe people are basically good and all the evil we see is a result of environmental factors. But every one who has kids knows that isn't true. Sure, an evil environment will encourage the evil already in us; that's why slums breed crime. But even in the best of environments children exhibit rebellion and defiance at a very early age. It comes naturally; they don't even have to be taught.

I got an email from someone named Jay. I have no idea who he is or where he lives. It simply read,

_Dear Reverend Andrus:_

_I was doing a search on the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale on the internet and I came across your ideas about "total human depravity." Why do you say that? Man was made in God's image and likeness. How can man's spirit be anything but the highest and best? I know you will throw a bunch of scripture my way, but why not speak of the great_
possibilities of man? Of his inherent divinity?
Thank you, Jay

I answered as follows:

Hi Jay,

Thanks for your note. I'm not sure how my ideas on "total human depravity" appeared on a search of Norman Vincent Peale, but I assume a search engine picked up a sermon I preached on the Doctrine of Man, in which I stated that, "Paul is appealing while Peale is appalling." (I was just kidding, sort of).

I believe in the authority of Scripture because I have always found it to be truthful. I believe if you read further in my sermons you will find I do indeed believe in the great possibilities of mankind, precisely because we are created in the image and likeness of God. The image has been marred, but it hasn't been erased. For example, the Scriptures tells us that we should curse no man because all "have been made in God's likeness." (James 3:9).

Because of the way I teach (through books of the Bible, paragraph by paragraph) I feel an obligation to let each passage speak for itself. When I preach Romans 3, I preach about human depravity. When I preach James 3, I preach about the glory of man. I don't think those two passages contradict one another; rather they look at two aspects of man's nature.

My problem with Peale and Schuller, to mention two prominent voices, is that they only preach about the glory of man, never about his depravity.

Ultimately, I believe in the depravity of man for two reasons: The Bible tells me so, and I've seen it with my own eyes.

Blessings on you and your search for the truth!

Warmest regards,

Michael P. Andrus

I think if we’re honest with the facts we have to acknowledge that mankind is basically sinful. Furthermore, as a child grows, the tendency toward sin does not diminish; it grows. The result is that virtually every human being in his natural state is capable of incredible evil, provided a certain frame of mind and a given set of circumstances. And if that were the whole story, the news would be bad indeed.

But the good news is that if and when a person commits his life to Christ he receives a new nature, a divine nature. The Apostle Peter speaks of this new nature in 2 Peter 1:4: "God . . . has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." This divine nature we receive is a capacity to please God, to do good, and to love others in a way we never could before.

The problem is, however, that the old nature with which we were born is not eradicated. Oh, there are some theologians who claim it can be eradicated in this life and that the believer can
reach a state of total sanctification, sometimes called “sinless perfection.” But I believe both Scripture and personal experience make it clear that the sinful nature remains with us, rearing its ugly head at the most inopportune times, begging for attention and demanding to be satisfied.

Now it shouldn’t surprise us that the presence of these two natures creates conflict in the believer’s life. Look at verse 17: “For 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, so that you do not do what you want.” Paul elaborates on this condition in Romans 7, only there he speaks, not in the second person, as here in Galatians, but in the first person. He admits that even as an Apostle he experienced this struggle. Listen to Romans 7:18-24, as paraphrased in The Message:

I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it (to do the right thing), but I can’t do it. I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question?

Friends, I hate to admit it as your pastor, but that’s also my autobiography for much of my life. I want very much to be God’s man, to always think pure thoughts, to pray about everything, to be a godly husband and father, to show compassion to hurting people, to witness to the lost souls all around me. But what happens? I often experience this battle inside of me. When I open my Bible, I find my thoughts going in all kinds of directions. When I pray I get sleepy. When I turn on the TV to relax I see sensual images that stir up lust. When I think about sharing my faith I get scared about what people may think. When I am motivated to do something good, selfishness fights against it.

This conflict is often very discouraging. But there is also an encouraging aspect to it. For one thing, it is actually strong evidence that I am a Christian. The unbeliever doesn’t experience such conflict, because he only has one nature to deal with—the sinful one he was born with. Oh, he may have conflict with his parents, or with society’s expectations, or even with his personal standards, but he doesn’t have conflict with the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is not living inside of him.

Yes, he may at times come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, but that’s not the same as conflict with Someone living inside of you. The believer, on the other hand, has the sinful nature he was born with and the divine nature he was born again with. He has the very Spirit of God dwelling inside him. And as we’re going to see over the next few weeks, that Spirit is powerful. His presence in our lives means that the sinful nature no longer has the power to completely control us like it once had. Therefore, we are no longer obligated to indulge the sinful nature we
were born with. We have a freedom from sin, not freedom to sin.

**Christian freedom is not freedom to exploit one’s neighbor. (13b, 15)**

Listen to verse 13b and 15: “Serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” This is the alternative to indulging the sinful nature—not isolating ourselves in a convent or monastery, but serving one another. The word “serve” in verse 13 is actually the Greek word for slavery. Isn't it ironic that, having urged his readers not to become slaves to the Law or to the sinful nature, Paul should now encourage them to become slaves of one another? It is a paradox for sure, but a valuable one. Slavery to the sinful nature is self-destructive. But slavery to one another is a deep source of joy.

Apparently the Galatians were failing miserably at this matter of serving and loving one another. In fact, Paul expresses their behavior in startling terminology as “biting and devouring each other.” This spiritual cannibalism is probably a reference to malicious talk and degrading slander, but one can't be sure. Several years ago I came across an Associated Press article which stated that human bites had increased 77% in the previous ten years. Furthermore, according to Michael Callahan, chief of emergency medicine at the University of California at San Francisco, “Human bites are a worse problem than dog bites because they are much more likely to get infected.” New York City reports that human bites used to rank third behind dogs and cats, but now rank second behind dogs. Maybe the Galatians were actually taking chunks out of one another.

But whether these were literal or figurative bites, I think it is instructive to note that it was apparently the legalism introduced by the false teachers that brought this destructive spirit into the church. I think conflict and disunity are probably most common in legalistic churches. That shouldn’t surprise us, because you can’t have your focus on serving and loving people if you’re constantly concerned with rules and regulations and who is failing to obey them. It’s not an accident that the legalistic Pharisees were Jesus’ greatest enemies.

But there is the potential for spiritual cannibalism in any church, and we need to be vigilant against it. Sometimes we don't even realize how destructive our comments and attitudes can be to others. Christian freedom is not freedom to exploit my neighbor, but rather to serve him and love him.

**Christian freedom is not freedom to disregard the basic moral law of God. (14)**

Throughout this letter Paul has been arguing against a Law-based approach to God and in defense of the Gospel of pure grace. Now, in a most striking fashion, he returns to the Mosaic Law and seems to speak favorably of it. ‘The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” That’s a quotation of God’s speaking to Moses in Leviticus 19:18.

First, let's consider why Paul should even be concerned about the Law, since he has emphasized
so strongly that we have been set free from it. The key I think is to realize that the relationship of believers to the Law was not dissolved when Jesus came; but it was definitely changed. In OT days the Law was a complete way of life similar to that of a child whose every waking moment is regulated. With the coming of Christ God began to treat His children as adults. He released us from the regulation of every area of our lives and replaced many of the regulations with principles.

Perhaps the most important of those principles is the far-reaching one mentioned here in verse 14, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If we took the time to look back at Leviticus we would find dozens of detailed rules and regulations as to how to treat one's neighbor lovingly in every conceivable circumstance. But instead of repeating the details Paul picks up only the principle. He doesn't dismiss the moral law of God from our lives; rather he wants us to understand that the essence of it is found in principles of conduct, not detailed rules of conduct.

Unfortunately there are some in our day who have misunderstood his point, perhaps on purpose. They tell us the only moral absolute we must obey is to love our neighbor as ourselves, and then they use that principle as a basis for actually violating the laws of God. For example, they say if you really love your neighbor, it’s OK to indulge in premarital, extramarital or even homosexual sex with him or her. If you really love your neighbor, it may be OK to murder him, as in abortion and euthanasia. Dr. Kevorkian, for example, portrayed himself as loving the people he killed.

Once again I remind us that we are experts at rationalizing our behavior. So God not only gave us the love principle, but He also defined how the love principle should be applied in many specific situations. The principles are the same in both Old and New Testaments, but the applications are sometimes different. We who are part of God’s church should not be looking to the book of Leviticus in the OT for our applications, but rather to the NT, particularly the Epistles.

Now, let’s review very briefly what we have learned so far.

Christian freedom is not the freedom to indulge the sinful nature;
   it is the freedom to control the appetites of the sinful nature.
It's not the freedom to exploit one's neighbor;
   it is the freedom to serve and love one's neighbor.
It's not the freedom to disregard the law of God;
   it is the freedom to fulfill the spirit of the law.

But how? What is the secret to finding victory in this war within ourselves so that we can exercise true freedom without sliding into either legalism or moral anarchy? The key is found in verses 16 and 18: “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of your sinful nature. . . . But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.” And that introduces our final and most important proposition this morning:

Christian freedom is possible only as we put our faith in Christ and as we walk by and are led by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 7:25, Galatians 5:16,18)
Do you remember earlier in the sermon when I referred to Romans 7 and Paul’s autobiography of his struggle between the old nature and the new nature? Here’s where we ended the quotation: “I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?” But that’s not where Paul ended. He answered his own question in the next verse: “The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.” (Romans 7:25). Freedom from our sinful nature is really impossible without faith in Christ, but with Him it is not only possible; it is our promised inheritance.

But Christian freedom is also impossible without the Holy Spirit, and that’s where Paul takes us here in Galatians 5. He tells us the Holy Spirit is the key. In fact, this section of Galatians is simply full of the Holy Spirit. He is mentioned seven times by name and many more times by implication. Notice I said “He.” The Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing. We should never speak of Him as an “it.”

We are told in verse 16 to “live by the Spirit (some translations are more literal and say, “walk”), and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Then in verse 18 another verb is used of our relation to the Holy Spirit: “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.” There is an active side—walking with Him—and a passive side—being led by Him. If we walk by the Spirit we will not carry out the desires of our old nature. If we are led by the Spirit, we will not be weighed down by the law.

I think Paul is trying to stress the tremendous difference between doing what is right for legalistic reasons and doing what is right for godly reasons. You see, two Christians can exhibit the exact same behavior, yet one of them can be a slave to law while the other is free from the law. Motivation makes all the difference in the world.

For example, I know many Christians who totally abstain from alcoholic beverages. Some of them do so for positive reasons of health or economics or testimony. I commend them for their decision. Others, however, abstain for legalistic reasons—spiritual pride, fear of what others will say, or even fear that God will zap them. That is not commendable, and the difference in attitudes is profound.

Two very different motivations can also be seen among those Christians who do not abstain from alcoholic beverages. Some drink for their health—a glass of red wine for their arteries, or a glass of wine at night to aid their sleep without having to take prescription medications—or to celebrate a special event or holiday, but they would never, under any circumstances, drink to excess. On the other hand, there are others who drink out of libertarian motives—they drink in order to be accepted by peers, or they drink to forget their troubles, and they may even become slaves to alcohol. There’s a huge difference in these two approaches.

The Scripture says, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17). I assume that means for some the liberty to participate and for others the liberty to refrain. When the Spirit is
leading, appropriate boundaries are recognized, but spiritual freedom is also realized, appreciated and enjoyed.

But some of you are saying, OK, I accept what you're saying, but how do I walk in the Spirit? How can I be led by the Spirit? The answer is so simple it's almost unacceptable. We walk by the Spirit and we are led by the Spirit when we choose to let Him fill us and control us. Eph. 5:18 says, “Do not get drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”

Whatever excessive wine does to an individual who imbibes, we are to let the Spirit do to us instead. Wine, when overindulged, takes over a person's will and controls his behavior. That is what we must let the Holy Spirit of God do to us. And it must be done by faith. There may not be any great signs and wonders that accompany the filling of the Spirit. On the other hand, there may be some unusual manifestations, and we should not fear them. But ultimately it is by faith we accept the fact that He is willing to do for us what He says.

There are means, of course, for the Spirit to progressively gain more control over our lives. It is not simply a matter of passive surrender. In Colossians he actually speaks of it as “putting to death” the old life. He also describes it as taking off a soiled wardrobe and putting on the clothes of the Spirit. Some of the habits or patterns that contribute to the Spirit’s control are daily Bible reading and study, prayer, meditation, attendance at worship, fellowship, and avoidance of obviously detrimental company or practices. But more than anything else it is a conscious and continuous acceptance of His will for our lives. That can happen through something as simple as starting every day with a sincere prayer that our wills and attitude would be controlled by the Holy Spirit.

In the next section, which Josh will bring to us next Sunday, Paul makes it clear that only the Holy Spirit can give us the strength to subdue our sinful passions and thus allow the fruit of the Spirit to grow in our lives.

**Conclusion:** W. H. Auden once wrote,

> I like to sin.
> God likes to forgive.
> The world is admirably arranged.

There were those in the early church who agreed, who thought that since salvation is by grace and since Christ has set us free, we are at liberty to do whatever we want. If we sin in the process, we just ask for forgiveness. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more! Even in the church today there are some who would have us believe the acid test of mature Christianity is freedom. The more mature you are, the more freedom you can exercise.

But that is not necessarily true. The acid test of mature Christianity is how much we use our freedom to serve others in love. The legalist is incapable of true biblical love. The libertarian is likewise incapable of true biblical love. But the one who understands the freedom that comes through faith in Christ and through control by the Holy Spirit is capable of incredible love and
service to his fellow man.

I believe our passage today is, more than anything else, a call to holiness and Christian love. I think it would be appropriate if we would just have a time of confession as we honestly lay before the Lord the ways in which we have used our freedom in Christ to satisfy the desires of the sinful nature, to exploit our neighbors, and to disregard the basic moral law of God. If we honestly repent of these things, we can receive the forgiveness of God. Then we can surrender to the complete control of the Holy Spirit and begin to walk in Him.

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i. I must comment briefly on the subject of the weaker brother, as discussed in detail in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, for it reveals to us that exploiting one’s neighbor can occur on both sides of the freedom/legalism divide. The weaker brother is a Christian who has an overly sensitive conscience in the gray areas, i.e. regarding activities that the Bible does not clearly spell out as right or wrong. In Paul's day one of the big issues was whether a Christian ought to eat meat which had previously been offered to idols in the pagan temples. The Christians with the sensitive consciences were denouncing those who ate the meat for what seemed to them to be licentious behavior, and the ones who ate the meat were denouncing those who refused to eat for their nitpicking legalism. Both were wrong in their attitudes.

Paul personally saw nothing wrong with eating meat offered to idols, and in that sense he came down intellectually and theologically on the side of those who understood diet to be an area of Christian freedom. But the major thrust of his exhortation is that both the strong brothers and the weak brothers must accept one another and show one another love. Listen to Romans 14:3-5,10,13.

*The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.* . . .

*You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.* . . .

*Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.*