

Windsor Locks  
Congregational Church  
*of*  
Windsor Locks, Connecticut

Sermon Transcript  
Sunday, September 5, 2021

**Galatians: The Holy Spirit vs. The Flesh**  
Galatians 5:16-17

*This message from Scripture was given to The Windsor Locks Congregational Church of Windsor Locks, at 8 Main Street, Windsor Locks, CT, 06096, on August 15, 2021, by Pastor David Rucquoi. This transcription bears the strengths and weaknesses of oral delivery and is not intended to be a polished essay; rather, is provided as an additional resource for the message.*

**Sermon Text**

**Galatians 5:16-17 (ESV)**

*“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For 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.”*

## Introduction

We have been looking at Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. This small, six-chapter book, packs powerful lessons that have influenced world history. Previously we discussed how the letter is Paul's response to a dangerous teaching that has crept into this church of Gentile believers, in which he depicts a series of contrasts between good and bad.

If you recall from my first sermon on Galatians, I made a graph that illustrates some of the main themes of the book, and shows Paul's flow of logic.

The argument in Paul's letter follows a progression of contrasts. It begins with Paul vs. false brothers, then quickly shifts to the gospel vs. the error (that we discussed in week 1). Paul had taught the Galatians that faith in God's promise leads to salvation, causing the transformed believer to increasingly live a holy life. The "false brothers" promoted the same elements, but in a different order. They taught that faith in Jesus plus obedience to the law resulted in salvation. In their "false gospel," faith in Jesus alone was not good enough. The next contrast Paul made was in faith vs. the law (which we discussed in week 2), this led Paul to make a series of comparisons between an heir vs. a slave, Sarah vs. Hagar and Isaac vs. Ishmael. The last major contrast Paul makes is between The Spirit vs. the flesh (this is what we will discuss today).

## The Flesh

Of the two terms, the flesh is mentioned first, right at the end of chapter two, where Paul says, *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"* (Gal. 2:20). What Paul means by "flesh" Vine points out can refer to the substance of the human body, but also represents "the totality of all that is essential to manhood," "the complete person," "the weaker element in human nature," and "the unregenerate state of men."<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller points out that the flesh is, essentially, that part of us that wants to be our own God, our own savior.<sup>2</sup> What we will see in Paul's argument, is a clear distinction between the finite, limited, restraining, enslaving elements of the flesh and the liberating Spirit of God. Paul started his letter addressing *"some who trouble you"* (1:7) *"false brothers"* (2:4), *"certain men"* and *"the circumcision party"* (2:12). In clear, oppositional language he was addressing specific people; but, then he addressed what it was they were teaching as *"a different gospel"* (1:6), *"a gospel contrary to the one we preached"* (1:8), *"man's gospel"* (1:11), and *"works of the law"* (2:15; 3:2). In his dramatic commentary on Galatians Gene Edwards speculates (not without reason) that a bulk of the believers in Galatia were common people, lower socio-economic class, and very likely slaves.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the population was intimately familiar with the restraints of slavery, so Paul uses language to depict the resulting influence of this *"different gospel."* Ironically, both Paul's gospel and the teaching he opposes appeal to foundational, respected, ancient Jewish patriarchs, documents, and history to validate their truth; but, while the "false brothers" encourage these pagan converts to adhere to the ancient law to please God, Paul points

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<sup>1</sup> W.E. Vine, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Original Greek Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 447-448.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, Grace Bible Church, Galatians Sermons: The Messengers of the Gospel, Accessed August 30, 2021, <https://cdn.gutensite.com/web001/site/3357/1453664/1453664.mp3>.

<sup>3</sup> Gene Edwards, *The Silas Diary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998).

out that people are incapable of adhering to the law. The law was intended to point out God's holiness and man's fallenness, and our inability to lift ourselves to God's standards. To try to be "good enough" (by God's holy standard), using Paul's logic, is to submit yourself to an unmeetable, inescapable trap, complete bondage. To rely on human strength (and not God's strength) will result in the honest discouragement of futility or the deceptive arrogance of self-approval. These are the options of bondage in the flesh that Paul contrasts with the Holy Spirit.

By the beginning of chapter 3, Paul alternates references to The Spirit and the flesh, until he really focuses on the contrast between them, in chapter 5, saying, "*the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh*" (Gal. 5:17).

### **The Holy Spirit**

Paul's references to the Holy Spirit show that the recipients needed no explanation of what he was talking about. His sixteen references to "*the Spirit*" or "*the promised Spirit*" or "*the Spirit of [God's] Son*" represent the person of the Holy Spirit, one of the three members of the Trinity. Nowhere in the Bible is the Holy Spirit referred to as an "it," or some mystical thing. He is always referred to as a person. Jesus spoke of Him when He said, "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, <sup>17</sup> even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you*" (John 14:16-17).

Paul does not explain the Trinity, nor all the roles of The Holy Spirit in the believer's life. He presumes they understand The Holy Spirit indwells every believer upon faith in Jesus (3:2), non-Jews and Jews (3:14), like spiritual DNA inherited from Abraham. This brings us to an amazing lesson found in 4:4-6, where we find two uses of the word "*sent*." They appear so closely, it would be easy to mistake them as representing the same event. Instead, they represent two sending events of the Triune-God.<sup>4</sup>

The first is in v. 4, "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*" Keller points out several questions this statement answers:

- What was the occasion? "*When the fullness of time had come...*"
- What did God do? "*...God sent forth his Son...*"
- Where did He go? Into the world.
- For what? "*...to redeem those who were under the law...*"
- Why? "*...so that we might receive adoption as sons.*"

Because of this action, those who trust in Christ are deemed "good enough." Jesus took the consequences for our sins, while all the privileges and virtues of His sonship are transferred to us. He became our substitute. And, to those who accept that gift, through faith, we become the children of God. If you were not here, this is what we talked about in my last message, which is available online.

The second event where God sends, states, "*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, Grace Bible Church, Galatians Sermons: The Experience of Adoption, Accessed August 13, 2021, <https://cdn.gutensite.com/web001/site/3357/1453647/1453647.mp3>.

*son, then an heir through God*” (Gal. 4:6-7). Here Paul uses the very same logic to explain the second sending:

- What was the occasion? “...*because you are sons...*”
- What did God do? “...*God has sent the Spirit of his son...*”
- Where did He go? “...*into our hearts...*”
- For what? To cry out.
- Why? “*So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*”

The first sending is our salvation, when we enter the Kingdom of God, when we believe, and the righteousness of Jesus is imparted (reckoned) to us. Two weeks ago I showed how this is an accounting term. It represents a transaction of promise. This first sending redeemed us. I was in college when the U.S. federal government imposed the \$0.05 refundable fee on bottles. After studying dry theological concepts in my pastoral classes, I was shocked to come home and find a huge banner in our local grocery store that read, “Redemption Center.” The idea was that you could bring your garbage there, turn it in, and receive riches for it! That’s what redemption is! We are told “*all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*” (Rom. 3:23) and that “*the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord*” (Rom. 6:23). Yet “*God shows his love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Rom. 5:8). This is redemption. Jesus takes our corruption, and (by accepting His gift) God imparts his value to us. This redemption, the first sending, relates what God thinks of us, but it doesn’t really impact what we think of ourselves, so God initiates a second sending.

The second sending explains our internal transformation, having been redeemed. In the first sending we are adopted as children of God. In the second sending, we are filled with his Spirit, causing us to “cry out.” This Greek term represents an “inarticulate shout that expresses deep emotion.”<sup>5</sup> As the text explains, it is the internal cry of our own heart.

Just before my senior year in college I spent the summer in Israel studying Arabic at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I met Roger Long, a Canadian and classmate. He and his wife, Janice, were caretakers of a large, historic home in Jerusalem. The first time Roger took me to his home, we got to the great gate and he buzzed the intercom. Janice electronically unlocked the gate, and as we entered the compound a little two-year-old boy came running from the house, arms wide, shouting, “Abba, abba!” It was Rogers son, David, eager to see his daddy. Roger bent down and scooped up the child, hugged him in a tight embrace, faces pressed together and laughing, as Roger spun him around. This is what it looks like when a child cries out “Abba!” And it is for this intimate connection God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His children, enabling us to *feel* our royal identity (In his message on this passage Tim Keller was quick to point out this is the only time you will hear a Presbyterian minister promoting feelings!). Our adoption is not merely an administrative act. The children of God are heirs of The King, and He wants us to lavish in our identity and relate with Him intimately.

### **Getting Practical**

In the book of Galatians, we come across terms like the law, circumcision, slavery, and a variety of theological concepts that, while important, are hard to embrace in our daily living here in 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> HELPS word-studies, Biblehub.com, Strong’s 2896 – *krazó*, accessed August 27, 2021, <https://biblehub.com/greek/2896.htm>.

Century, central Connecticut. As I have prepared each of these three sermons, I find myself needing to read, and re-read the text, to stay focused on what Paul is saying and how it applies to us today (and it applies a great deal). Let me highlight three main points we can apply to our daily lives, and finish with a story, that I hope will help you embrace Paul's greatest concern.

Interestingly enough, two of Paul's points are founding elements of the Evangelical Free Church of America. When Peter, Barnabas and others alienated the Gentile believers, Paul determined this was not a simple matter of dining protocol. Something much more important was at stake. Paul avoided personality conflicts and focused on the issue at hand. This first point is know what you stand for and stand for it. For the EFCA, this is summarized in a statement attributed to a Lutheran pastor (Rupertus Meldenus, 1582-1651), who stated, "In essentials unity; in non-essentials charity; in all things, Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> The "*different gospel*" of the "*false brothers*" created disunity and devalued Jesus. Paul was not about to smooth that over, nor would he get sidetracked by a personality battle. He was focused on the issue at hand. Our society, and the church today, are challenged with many conflicts. The unity we are to be known for is based on central truths. Know what you stand for and stand for it.

This brings us to the second mantra of the EFCA that Paul emulates. From the early days of being a reform movement in the state churches of Scandinavia, "believers developed a strong conviction about the centrality and authority of Scriptures." The question that motivated the founding of the EFCA was the watchword of those believers: "Where stands it written?"<sup>7</sup> Similarly, we see Paul basing his arguments soundly on Scripture, not only pursuing a given truth, but modeling the standard by which to determine truth.

The third point centers around this contrast between the Spirit and the flesh. Throughout Galatians we are being told not to rely on the law, but to trust in the promise. Now, as we focus on the Spirit, we are told, "*walk in the Spirit*" (5:16), be "*led by the Spirit*" (5:18), "*live by the Spirit*" and "*keep in step with the Spirit*" (5:25). At first glance it appears that the "you should" of the law is being replaced by a "you should" of the Spirit. Either way, we are being compelled to do something. What's the difference, and how do we grasp doing something that is based on the intangible, invisible, uncontrollable Spirit of God? Answer: With the law we are being told, "God likes this." And we think, if I do that, then God owes me. Last week we discussed this as a transaction of the law, where our focus is completely on ourselves, and our salvation is dependent on nobody but ourselves. It's all "me." Sadly, with the law we consider what God is obligated to do, as if we deserve it. What we fail to recognize are two very critical elements: first, we don't deserve it, never will, never can. God's that holy. We're that corrupt. Second, God is so gracious He has already provided for our salvation. He didn't have to, He chose to, and, so long as we try to obligate Him we miss the fact that the work is already done. So, while the law has our focus on ourselves, the promise has our focus on God. This is what it means to trust, this is relationship. This is what it looks like to fulfill the "Greatest Commandment," and this is what it means to "walk in the Spirit." It is a pursuit of a relationship with a person, not the fulfillment of a list of rules.

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<sup>6</sup> Evangelical Free Church of America, *Evangelical Convictions* (Minneapolis, MN: Free Church Publications, 2011), 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

So, the three major points we can apply from Galatians are 1) Know what you stand for and stand for it; 2) Where stands it written? Base your convictions on the Scriptures; 3) Keep your focus on The Lord in a relationship of trust, rather than on yourself.

As we finish our study on Galatians, by looking at this sending of “...*the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”* (4:6), consider the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). When the son came back to the father’s home, he didn’t seek restoration as a son, he only hoped for a position as a servant. The son did not feel he deserved the position he walked away from. He only hoped to be treated as a servant. Perhaps he had been humbled. Perhaps he was still hanging on to some aspect of control as he said, “*treat me as one of your hired servants*” (Luke 15:19). He was seeking the relationship of employer/employee, earning his own keep. His own works would eek out whatever sustenance he deserved, trusting the Father only to justly recompense his work. Despite his position as son, his greatest hope and highest aspiration was to be treated as a servant. That’s living by the law, and all he could see. Previously he demanded his right for independence, now he requested the recompense of duty. In both cases, he was a prisoner within himself. So the Father did what only a Father could (or would) do, to convince the boy of his cherished identity. The father embraced him, kissed him, and celebrated him, because he’s not just a hired servant. He is the father’s son! This second sending, of the Holy Spirit, changes our view of ourselves. We are children of The King! The sending of the Spirit into our heart is The Father’s kiss.

## **Conclusion**

When a pastor preaches on a passage of scripture, and leaves some truths unaddressed, it is said that “they left a lot of meat on the bone.” In our brief discussion on the book of Galatians it would be fairer to say I only gave you a sample taste. But, I hope that sample gave you an appetite to further pursue understanding this impactful book.

Applying this concept of The Spirit entering your heart, crying “Abba, Father!” is not easy to conceptualize, so let me end with a story. While no two people have an identical experience, here’s a theoretical example of how this might look in our context today (and, to help avoid fumbling gender ambiguity, the theoretical child will be presented as a boy). Imagine a child born (in our place and time) to a family that only slightly gives a nod to religion. Through outside influences, the child comes to know and embrace the gospel, making the boy a child of God living in an earthly home. Then the boy’s father is unfaithful, repeatedly. The parents fight over money, and the father leaves, abandoning both the mother and the child. Eventually the child goes to college, afraid of finances, afraid of relationships, unaware of the most basic elements needed to navigate in an adult world, clinging to hope in his heavenly father. Other men come into his life. He gets scholarships through college. Now imagine that, from a distance, the boy learns that his earthly father has embraced a lifestyle of womanizing, drunkenness, and eventually murder. As the boy becomes a man, he can’t help but to see his earthly father’s image staring back at him every morning as he shaves. When people learn of the boy’s earthly father, they distance themselves (projecting the character of the father on the son, reinforcing the boy’s own crisis of identity). But, remember, the lesson we are reading about in Galatians is of a Heavenly Father who gives His children a new, royal identity, as their hearts cry out “*Abba! Father!*” Imagine that when the boy finishes college, a Christian man offers him a car to use, to get his first job. Imagine his first employer is a Christian business owner and CPA,

who hires the boy to manage the office, and sends him to business school to learn the basics of handling and reconciling checking accounts and credit cards. Why the man would hire someone with no background, then train him to have the skills makes no sense; but, the boy senses his Heavenly Father is making up for what his earthly father left undone. Let's keep going with this. Now imagine the boy has to return the car he was loaned and buy his first car. God provides another Christian man (let's call him, "Mr. Deal") who helps the boy get his first car at auction. I know, it sounds hokey; but, could God do this? Then the boy needs to find new housing. Mind you, he barely has a job, and no savings. So he goes to an aunt, who lives in a wealthy community and is active in real estate, asking her if she knows anyone who needs house-sitting. While they are talking, the phone rings. It is a friend of the aunt asking if the boy's cousin could watch her house while she and her husband go on vacation. The aunt laughs and says, "No, my son is out of town; but it's funny you should ask. My nephew is here and was just asking if I knew of anyone needing house sitting." I know, this sounds strange. But, could God's oversight of His children be manifested this way in today's world? Of course it could. Then, to his surprise, the boy is asked to stay with that family for five years. The family doesn't charge him anything, they even provide meals. In return, the boy cares for their home and their dog, as he works and goes to graduate school (paid for by his company). In time, the boy (once fearful of becoming a man) has a firm career trajectory, a nest-egg of life savings, both an undergraduate and graduate degree, yet no debt. Despite his dysfunctional upbringing, his Heavenly Father has protected the boy through harmful relationships. He has become engaged to a beautiful Christian girl, who (instead of projecting her fears of the boy being like his earthly father, as so many other girls did, projects her faith that he will be like his heavenly father). What else can we add. Oh, he's been asked to serve as an elder in a strong Christian church, despite his young age. Because of God's oversight, the boy (now a man) could not only afford an engagement ring, but paid for the wedding, an extravagant honeymoon, and still has enough savings to buy his bride their first home. And they lived happily ever after. OK, yeah, this sounds unreal, perhaps hokey. But I'm trying to step out of this first-century context to illustrate how God doesn't just declare our legal adoption. Our Father in heaven wants us to know and embrace Him as Father. It's not enough to be legally adopted. God wants us to feel like his children, to know His embrace, and walk in confidence of His love. While this story may sound like a sappy, unlikely cliché, it is a realistic picture of how our Heavenly Father manifests his care for His children. Could God do this? Of course He could, and I know, because I am that boy. Every detail of that story (even Mr. Deal) is the real account of my experience growing up.

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