

ECC Growth Groups – Term 2, 2014
Study 7 – Galatians 5:13-26

Big Idea: Paul urges his readers to live out their freedom in Christ by keeping in step with the Spirit rather than indulging the sinful nature.

Study Aim: That group members will grasp and live out their freedom in Christ by keeping in step with the Spirit and not indulging their sinful nature.

Sharing

Have one/two people share their story of how the Gospel changed their life and how they've been challenged and encouraged in their Christian life to stick with the Gospel.

Discussion Starter

After sharing the Gospel with a friend, he/she replies, "So you're telling me that it doesn't matter what I do?"

What is *good* about your friend's question?

How would you respond to your friend?

Bible Reading

Read Galatians 5:13-26.

Activity¹

Place the title/heading cut outs ("Acts of the sinful nature" and "Fruit of the Spirit") face up at different ends of the room, preferably where all group members can still see them. Then mix up the acts/characteristics cut outs (e.g. "idolatry", "faithfulness") and place them face down together somewhere in the middle of the room. One by one, have group members turn over an act/characteristic and, as a group, decide together which title/heading to place it under².

¹ All the information (i.e. titles/headings and acts/characteristics) for this Activity is contained in a table for you at the end of the Study. Obviously you will need to print and cut them out before the Study commences.

² This activity may seem childish because it is quite simple and straightforward but it has at least three benefits. Firstly, activities like this one really help people who are kinaesthetic learners. That is, their preference is to learn by doing rather than hearing (auditory) and seeing (visual). Most Bible study material is geared towards visual or auditory learners, to the detriment of those who do not absorb information as readily in those two particular ways. Secondly, the repetition of the (what should be) straightforward placement of the acts/characteristics under the titles/headings reinforces the two main categories of the sinful nature/flesh and the Spirit. This repetition should bear fruit (pardon the pun) as the rest of the passage is investigated in the 'Passage Questions' section. These are the two main categories that Paul contrasts throughout the passage, and indeed elsewhere in the book. Thus the straightforward nature of the Activity is actually one of its main strengths. Thirdly, being able to 'sight' each of the acts/characteristics will help group members when they spend some time in personal reflection later in the Study.

Passage Questions

Paul tells his readers that they were “*called to be free*” (v 13). How has this freedom come about?³

In Galatians 5:1 we read, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free”. Each week throughout Galatians we have seen that this freedom comes to us through the Gospel/through faith in the promise/by the Spirit as opposed to freedom coming through following or observing the law.

What is this freedom to be used for?

Paul calls on his readers in verse 13 to use their freedom to serve one another in love rather than use their freedom to indulge the sinful nature.

Note that Paul is careful to base his call to Christian living on who we are in Christ. The order is: We are free in Christ – therefore live out that freedom in this way. In a passage that speaks so strongly about how we are to live as Christians we must be careful to retain this foundational balance. It is not a case of live this way and you will be this. Rather, the New Testament constantly says you are this, therefore live in this way.

Why do we find it so difficult to use our freedom in this way?⁴

Because we are still sinful we are tempted to continue to live in, and for, sin. We still desire to focus on, and live for, ourselves rather than looking outward to the needs of others.

³ Although it is not as explicit as similar questions in previous studies, this is actually a question that places the passage and the study in the context of the book as a whole. This particular verse does not tell us the answer to the question. Rather, what the passage does is tease out the implications of the answer. Group members will have cause to remember and reflect on what they have been seeing week after week in the letter. Again, it is crucially reinforcing that good Bible reading means reading the text in its context.

⁴ In a way, this is a bit of a ‘trick’ question. The way it is phrased makes it sound as though group members are to answer from their own personal knowledge and experience rather than from the passage. And if they do so, that is perfectly fine. However, as the following question indicates, the answer is actually contained in the passage if we keep reading. Hopefully by firstly reflecting on their personal knowledge and experience the perspective from the passage itself will have greater impact on group members.

You will notice that there is no separate ‘Application Questions’ section in this Study. The hope is that the Application component has been sufficiently weaved throughout the rest of the Study – e.g. this question, the later Activity and other questions. When preparing a Bible Study, don’t always feel as though you need to leave all the Application to the end. It can actually work just as well, if not even better on occasions, if the Observation, Interpretation and Application aspects (see Study 6 for definitions of these) are more organically and fluidly combined.

From verses 16-18, how does Paul explain why we find this difficult?

The Christian life is pictured as a conflict. The sinful nature is still present, with all of its desires at work. But the Spirit has also taken up residence within us, with all of his desires for our lives. They are like two great forces, working against each other and desiring what the other does not. Experiencing a conflict is by its very nature difficult.

How is this picture of the Christian life different from how some people see it?

Sometimes we will say to ourselves, 'How can I be a Christian if I still struggle with x, or if I am still like y'. We hear people talk about the Christian life in victorious terms, giving the impression that we are not true Christians if we still struggle with sin. Paul's perspective is very different. In fact, the very presence of this conflict is an indication that we are Christian. If we did not have God's Spirit there would be no such struggle – our sinful nature would always dominate.

Some people view the Christian life as one where it doesn't really matter how we live. To them, we can go on living much as we did before, where holiness and godliness is seen almost as an optional extra or not really that important. Paul will have none of this perspective either. The Christian life is one where we are called to live by the Spirit in order not to gratify the desires of the sinful nature (v 16).

I'm sure there are also other viewpoints that are corrected by these verses. Hopefully you or your group will come up with them and include them in your discussion here.

Activity

Re-read verses 19-23.

Give group members a few minutes to individually reflect on the list of the “acts of the sinful nature” and the “fruit of the Spirit” (these should still be visible from the earlier Activity). Have them choose one act and one fruit that they would like God to help them with in their Christian life. Allow time for group members to individually commit this to the Lord in prayer.

Passage Questions cont.

People are often quite troubled by what Paul says in verse 21. Given what we've seen in this passage, and in the rest of Galatians, what must this verse *not* mean? What then *does* it mean?⁵

Paul has repeatedly emphasised throughout Galatians that we are justified by faith and not by works. We are saved not because of what we do or don't do but only by Jesus Christ.

The issue here is not sins into which we fall but rather sin as a lifestyle. The life on view here is a life that is characterised by such things – where the sinful nature is unrestrained and in control. A life such as this is one where there is no evidence of the Spirit being present or at work – the Spirit that brings new birth and participation in the kingdom of God.

In this very passage he has indicated that the Christian life is one where we will face an ongoing battle with sin – because our sinful nature and the Spirit are in conflict with each other.

What does Paul mean when he says in verse 23 – “Against such things there is no law”?

Laws are specific and they restrict. Theoretically you can satisfy and live up to them. When it comes to the fruit of the Spirit there is both a freedom to express these characteristics with generous abandon and the lack of a standard by which we could ever say we have finished, completed or satisfied them.

Paul says on a couple of occasions that we are to “live by the Spirit” or “keep in step with the Spirit”. Why is this a great way to sum up how we are to live as Christians?⁶

It is the positive alternative to indulging in the sinful nature. In fact, verse 16 would indicate that if we are living by the Spirit we won't be gratifying our sinful nature's desires. We can't do both at the same time! Thus, the acts of the sinful nature will be avoided and the characteristics listed under the fruit of the Spirit will flow out and become evident.

⁵ Verses like these can be problematic for Bible Study leaders. On the one hand, they can prove to be fodder for those who love red herrings and taking discussions on tangents. On the other hand, it is a verse that can provide legitimate confusion and distress for some people. Ignoring it altogether is probably not the best approach as it can turn the verse into an elephant in the room – everyone knows it is there but no one wants to acknowledge or talk about it. However, allowing it to consume an inordinate amount of time within your Study is also counter-productive as it is not the big idea of the passage. What is the way forward? Including it in your Study demonstrates a willingness to engage with what is a difficult verse. However, including it also means that you can have more control over when and where the discussion of the verse occurs. Like so many other such verses, placing it within the context of the passage at large resolves a number of dilemmas that are initially apparent.

⁶ Given that this is the last question of the Study – and there are no Application questions to follow (see earlier footnote) – it is important that this discussion both satisfactorily summarises the overall discussion and also contains an element of application (how we are to live in light of what we have looked at).

Prayer Points

Praise God for the freedom that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Thank God for the gift of his Spirit to live his way.

Ask God for his help to live by the Spirit and not use our freedom to live for our sinful nature.

Sexual immorality	Envy
Impurity	Drunkenness
Debauchery	Orgies
Idolatry	Love
Witchcraft	Joy
Hatred	Peace
Discord	Patience
Jealousy	Kindness
Fits of rage	Goodness
Selfish ambition	Faithfulness
Dissensions	Gentleness
Factions	Self-control
Acts of the sinful nature	Fruit of the Spirit