

I am very grateful for the past few weeks that I got to spend down in Colombia. ... It is good to be back... but I sure am glad that you all allowed me to go.

One of the impressions that I bring home with me... is all of the hardships of daily life... that our missionaries so willingly endure... all so they can serve our Lord. Bugs constantly attack your arms... legs... face... and neck... causing raised bumps that itch tremendously. They have frogs and snakes that are extremely poisonous. Frequently they make themselves quite at home in our missionaries houses. ... The year-round heat and humidity is sweltering... so your face and clothing never seem fresh. (I lived from bottle to bottle of distilled water... to keep myself hydrated. After finishing one... I could hardly wait until I could acquire another.) Of course you have to be very careful not to ingest one drop of the Colombian's regular water... or you will be very sick. And as careful as you are... you may still become tethered to a toilet. (So many times, out of my routine when I brush my teeth, I nearly stuck my toothbrush under the water faucet... or opened my mouth under the cold water of a shower.) ... The roads are littered with everyone's trash. (The community dump is wherever you happen to be when you have something to discard. Just throw it on the ground. So unsightly trash is everywhere.) ... Smells of trash and burning brush fills the air... along with the smells of exhaust from thousands of busses... and even **more** motorcycles... ... Oh... and because there are so many donkeys... burrows... and horses on those over-crowded streets... you also need to add **their** "exhaust" to this ambience. ... When driving... you might get pulled over by the authorities... if they see you are American. These authorities are very corrupt and they will manufacture

some infraction of a supposed law... and tell you that they will have to impound your vehicle. But of course... if you pay them a bribe... they will let you go... (In our case it cost us the equivalent of 230 American dollars.)

One day... Mike had several errands to run in Cartagena... and I went along... to experience some more of the Colombian experience. It was of course very hot... the smell of exhaust was strong... my stomach was rumbling and I risked being far from a restroom... my arms and legs were itching... the streets were crowded with busses... cars... motorcycles... horse-drawn carts... pedestrians... and beggars at every intersection approached us because they saw we were "Americanos". ... Everyone seems to drive... with what looked to me... an absolutely insane traffic order... (which was NO order at all... no rhyme or reason... just massive confusion... on narrow streets... which I thought looked more like alleyways.) It was noisy... multitudes of revved motorcycle engines squeezing into spaces you'd never think would fit... and then thundering off to another tight squeeze ahead... our own van only able to progress at about 3 miles per hour... (vehicles beeping their horn every 5 feet)... all of the heat... all of the smells... all of the massive traffic confusion... and very demanding street beggars... were getting to me a bit. Several times someone would walk up to the van and wash the windshield without being invited... and then they demanded to be paid. A minute or two later someone else would do the same thing. ... As I drove around with Mike my mind was deep in thought about all of the adverse conditions that the Riffles and the Harpools so willingly live with... so they can serve Christ.

My thoughts got re-directed by a comment that Mike made. It was almost as if he was aware of what my thoughts were. ... Mike turned to me and

said: “You know, Jim, we came down here so focused on ministry. Our thoughts were mainly what we would be doing for the Lord. We thought about lives that Christ would change through us. ... But you know what? ... God was primarily interested in making significant change in us. It would seem that His primary goal for bringing us here... was to make us more complete.

There is significant truth in that for all of us. ... Whenever God calls you and I... to step out and minister for His glory... we often think ONLY about the best way to obtain ministry results... the things we will **do** in that ministry. But I think Mike was right... and our passage this morning will bear this out: ... God is MOST interested in changing you and I.

One of the most jarring sentences in the Bible goes like this:

**1 Corinthians 13:3 (ESV)**

*If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

You and I can step away from all of the comforts that we enjoy right here... we can go minister in a terribly uncomfortable place... and even if we were to suffer a horrible **death** in doing so... without God’s work deep inside of us... filling us with His love for others... it is all worthless! ... You can make ultimate sacrifice in ministry... and be lost forever.

1 Corinthians 13:3 gives us a radical standard by which we MUST evaluate all ministry that we do. ... Every time you pray... every time you give an offering... every time you serve in AWANA... the nursery... KIDS church... kitchen help... women’s ministry... home Bible study groups... Youth

group... even – bringing a casserole to a church potluck... there is a right way... and there is a wrong way... according to this standard.

Our passage in Galatians this morning... offers tremendous insight about our ministry standard. Our radical biblical critique for all that we might do in ministry... that we must never forget is this: "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." ... Or to put it very bluntly: you can go to hell fighting for the orphans in Colombia who are being trafficked to pedophiles... you can go to hell fighting for Christian liberty that our nation once enjoyed... you can go to hell while being here every Wednesday night listening to Bible verses from our AWANA kids... (LISTEN! ... Get this... and you will understand our passage in Galatians much better...) Love can never be defined simply as mere **deeds** that you do... it always involves the condition of the heart of the doer.

We might be so impressed with our missionaries who have given enormously to minister down in Colombia... but it is just as what Mike told me... God looks on the heart and queries the hidden motives of the soul. And God is often more preoccupied in making necessary change in us. This is far more important than the things we do... or plan to do for Him.

I want to take you back to a verse we looked at... my last Sunday before I left for Colombia. ...We saw in Galatians 5:6... that the heart which is acceptable to God is **not** one which depends on its works... but rather one that has a particular type of faith... It must be the kind that expresses itself as a life of love. Love is an essential part of a faith that saves. It is not optional whether you love one another. ... No one can say, "I am saved by

faith regardless of whether I love people or not." ... For the only faith which saves is "faith working through love"

### **Galatians 5:6**

Love is the evidence of genuine faith.

The verses we will be studying this morning... pick up from Galatians 5:6... and presses it home with a command. ... So... let's now look at our passage for today...

### **Galatians 5:13-15**

We have been called to liberty. ... The Christian is a free man. He is free from the *guilt* of sin... because he has experienced God's forgiveness. ... He is free from the *penalty* of sin... because Christ paid it by dying for him on the cross. ... And he is... through the Spirit... free from the *power* of sin in his daily life. ... He is also free from the *Law*... with its demands and threats.

More than one commentary that I read on this passage stated that Paul's critics in Galatia... were probably condemning Paul's stand on Christian freedom. ... From what Paul writes in our passage here... it seems like an answer to some criticism that the freedom Paul preached... would only lead to people living without restraint or guidelines. ... "*Paul is creating some kind of godless anarchy... everyone is free to do whatever looks right in their own eyes. ... Sin all you want! Paul says it's OK...*" ... Our passage looks like a response from Paul to this kind of criticism... Paul's immediate

answer is: Christian freedom is not just a freedom FROM... it is a freedom TO... a freedom to serve one another in love.

The logic of Galatians 5:13–15 is simple. It is not a set of rules and regulations on the outside that is most effective... for governing our lives... rather it is love on the inside... . . . . The gist of our text is this: "through love be servants of one another. . . . If you will do this... you will fulfill the whole law. If you don't... then you will destroy yourselves."

In love... you and I are called to become servants of one another. Love... which serves the needs of others... is the **only** way Christian freedom is to express itself. . . . When you govern your life on the basis of being obedient to external laws... rules... and regulations... you are in slavery. . . . But when you serve each other in love... you are in **freedom**. . . . How does that work...? Why is this the case...?

Now we have come to the crux of the matter. What I am about to say... can be very life-changing... even if you have been a Christ-follower for many years...

*Love is motivated by the joy of sharing our fullness... but the *works of the flesh* are motivated by the desire to fill our emptiness.*

Look carefully at the ministry you do. Have you been ministering out of love... or as a work of the flesh...? . . . *Love is motivated by the joy of sharing our fullness... but the *works of the flesh* are motivated by the desire to fill our emptiness.*

"Flesh"... as Paul uses it in the book of Galatians... speaks of our own human efforts to please God... AND it also includes what is behind those efforts - our ego... ... Our ego feels a deep emptiness and uses whatever means possible... or within its power to fill that emptiness. ... So if someone is religious... they try to use rules and regulations thinking that will please God... and He will then fill their emptiness. ... If someone is irreligious... it may use booze... or sex... or money... or power. So "flesh" means human effort that is driven by our ego... trying to fill an emptiness. And one thing is sure - the flesh is never free. ... It is enslaved to one futile desire after another in its effort to fill an emptiness which only Christ can fill.

So coming back... now... to what Paul writes in verse 13... "Don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh"... he means, don't surrender the all-satisfying fullness you have in Christ... by returning to an unsatisfying hunt for mere physical pleasures or self-exaltation.

Works of the flesh are motivated by a desire to fill our emptiness. ... But love is very different... it is motivated by the joy of sharing our fullness.

When we love... we are not enslaved to use things or people... to fill our emptiness. ... Love is the overflow of our fullness. ... When God fills the emptiness of our heart with forgiveness... and help... and guidance... and meaning... and purpose... He frees us from the bondage to accumulate things and manipulate people.

Verses 14 and 15 give us a positive and a negative incentive to live like this... the positive is in verse 14... and the negative is in verse 15.

### **Galatians 5:14-15**

The amazing thing about love is that it takes the place of all the laws God ever gave. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ... solves every problem in human relations... If you love people (because you love Christ), you will not steal from them, lie about them, envy them, or try in any way to hurt them. Love in the heart is God's substitute for laws... rules... and regulations.

If a person cared for everyone else as much as he cared for himself, he would need no law. He would be living and doing exactly what he should.

This is the reason love fulfills all the law. Love does not take advantage of other people. Love will not use other people to fulfill one's own purpose, greed, or lust. Love will not hurt someone else any more than we would want someone to hurt us.

Now... there is a lot of confusion today... about the self-love referred to in this verse: "Love your neighbor *as yourself*." (From this verse... we get such nonsense as... You can't love others until you love yourself...) And the most common error from this verse... is the assumption that this is a *command* to love yourself... and that self-love means self-esteem. ...Both of these assumptions are wrong. ... Reading this verse in its context... it is clear that Paul assumes that people already love themselves. This verse does not command it. It doesn't need to... This verse declares... "You shall love your neighbor as you (already) love yourself." And the self-love they assume... is the strong interest you have in your own health and safety and happiness.



"Love your neighbor as yourself" is not a command to love yourself. It is a command to take your natural... already existing love of self... and make it the measuring rod of your love for others.

There is not a harder command in the Bible than this one. ... It means: ... Want to feed the hungry as much as you want to feed yourself when you get hungry. ... It means: ... Want to encourage the lonely person just as much as you want loving attention and affirmation. ... Want to help the person broken down on the side of the road... as much as you are glad you are not stalled on the roadside. ... Want to forgive the mistakes... and even hurtful behaviors done against you... as much as you want others to forget all your screw-ups and inappropriate behaviors toward others. Want to share Christ with your neighbor as much as you are glad you know Christ yourself.

Use all the creativity and energy and perseverance to do good things for others that you use in doing good things for yourself. ... Care about what happens to others... as much as you care about what happens to yourself.

This would render every law... every rule... and every regulation... totally unnecessary... It would fulfill the law! ... We would have so much joy... and people would be coming to Christ right and left.

If we don't... verse 15 gives the tragic alternative: "If you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another." ... A church of people who do not serve each other in love... will destroy itself.

When we believers lose the motivation of love... we become critical of others. ... We stop looking for good in them and see only their faults. ...

Soon an entire church is devoured. ... (LISTEN!) ... A GREAT fellowship like ours... can be taken down in an instant!

So let me just bluntly ask: Have you talked behind someone's back? ... Have you focused MORE on anyone in this fellowship's shortcomings... than their strengths? ... Please think carefully about this. ... Have an honest introspection!

I plead with you... that if you have been feeling critical of someone... make a list of that person's *positive* qualities. They **do** have them. Start putting your primary attention on **those**. ... Now... if problems need to be addressed in someone... then go directly to that person... speak to them in love... rather than to others - in gossip...

Remember... we can only love if we are free. ...And love is motivated by the joy of sharing our fullness... not by the desire to fill our emptiness.

It is not a coincidence... that verse 15 describes what wild animals do... when they are starving... not when they are filled (The description here is what they do when they are empty... instead of content.) "If you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another." When you are not filled with God... when your **ministry** motivation... is to fill an emptiness... verse 15 shows you the inevitable result. Gossipers and backbiters... show themselves to be people who are not filled with God... so they seek to fill their emptiness.

But... God has called every believer to the freedom of fullness which overflows in love. Through love... be servants of one another... love your

neighbor just as much as you love yourself. ... You have seen what the alternative is!