

The Nature Of Christian Freedom

Printed Text • Galatians 5:1-15

Devotional Reading • 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will DISCERN the differences between legalism and freedom that comes with responsibility, EXPERIENCE freedom as trusting in the work of Christ rather than our own efforts for salvation, and CHOOSE a life of freedom in Christ that is guided by serving and loving others with humility.

In Focus

“What’s wrong with you, Elijah?” Ben asked as his roommate came in and slumped down on the couch.

“I’m tired. Between soup kitchen duty and my usher board meeting, I was helping the night ministry collect clothes for the homeless. It’s exhausting serving God’s people.”

“I suppose,” replied Ben. “You have to pace yourself.”

Elijah went on like he hadn’t heard Ben. “I think I’m joining the sick-and-shut-in committee next. That would be good, right?”

“Sounds like you have too much on your plate already. You might want to slow down.” “Nah, we’re supposed to serve one another, right?” asked Elijah. “How else am I going to stay on God’s good side?”

“Elijah, we should serve as an outpouring of God’s love for us, not to gain points with Him.”

“Ouch! Am I that calculating?”

“Hey, I know your intentions are good,” Ben reassured Elijah. “Just understand that God has freely given us His grace, and because of that, we have His favor. So we don’t have to figure out what to do when we can seek the Holy Spirit to guide our lives.”

Why is it so easy for believers to get caught up in the extremes of legalism or catering to their fleshly desires?

Keep In Mind

“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”
(Galatians 5:14, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Liberty (Galatians 5:1, 13) *eleutheria* (Gk.) — Freedom, especially from bondage

B. Flesh (v. 13) *sarx* (Gk.) — Animal or human skin; the physical body; the mortal part of existence

Say It Correctly

Bithynia. bih-THIN-ee-ah

Cappadocia. cap-poe-DOE-shaw

Phrygia. FRIDGE-ee-ah

Judaizer. JEW-dee-ize-er

KJV

Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

2 Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.

3 For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.

4 Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

5 For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.

6 For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.

7 Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?

8 This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you.

9 A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

10 I have confidence in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded: but he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be.

11 And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased.

12 I would they were even cut off which trouble you.

13 For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

15 But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.

NLT

Galatians 5:1 So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.

2 Listen! I, Paul, tell you this: If you are counting on circumcision to make you right with God, then Christ will be of no benefit to you.

3 I'll say it again. If you are trying to find favor with God by being circumcised, you must obey every regulation in the whole law of Moses.

4 For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace.

5 But we who live by the Spirit eagerly wait to receive by faith the righteousness God has promised to us.

6 For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love.

7 You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth?

8 It certainly isn't God, for he is the one who called you to freedom.

9 This false teaching is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough!

10 I am trusting the Lord to keep you from believing false teachings. God will judge that person, whoever he is, who has been confusing you.

11 Dear brothers and sisters, if I were still preaching that you must be circumcised—as some say I do—why am I still being persecuted? If I were no longer preaching salvation through the cross of Christ, no one would be offended.

12 I just wish that those troublemakers who want to mutilate you by circumcision would mutilate themselves.

13 For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.

14 For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

15 But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.

The People, Places, and Times

Galatia. The Galatia of the New Testament was an area in what is now north central Turkey, where people of many different cultural backgrounds lived together. The Gauls, a Celtic people, had invaded the Asia Minor peninsula by invitation of the king of Bithynia, who enlisted their help in fighting civil wars. They eventually settled in parts of the region formerly known as Cappadocia and Phrygia. The area became a Roman province in 25 BC. Because of Rome's tendency to rezone its provinces, the Galatians Paul addressed in his letter would not have only been inhabitants of Galatia proper, but also citizens of other nearby regions.

Circumcision. Every male among Abraham's household (blood relatives and servants) was to be circumcised as a symbol of God's covenant (Genesis 17). Adult male circumcision was common in some ancient societies, symbolizing a young man's full acceptance into society with all its responsibilities and privileges. The Abrahamic covenant's circumcision was unique in that, after the initial group of men was circumcised, the ritual was from then on practiced on 8-day-old infant boys. This showed that no special deed of the person was needed to enter into the covenant with God. Simply living made a boy part of the community of faith. When circumcision was written down as part of the Law (Leviticus 12:3), Moses shared the procedure's spiritual understanding by "instructing the Israelites to circumcise their hearts" (Deuteronomy 10:16), which meant that in addition to the physical sign, they were also under God's covenant and had to follow His instructions. As Judaism grew, circumcision also became a symbol of Jewish identity, especially in the Greco-Roman Empire, where the dominant culture did not circumcise their males.

Background

At the time Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians, a group of Jewish Christians known as Judaizers was teaching that Gentile converts needed to be circumcised both as a sign of their covenant with God and a means of justification or being made right with Him. They also insisted the Gentile Christians also observe other parts of Mosaic Law. Paul and others of like mind found the demand for circumcision was in contradiction to salvation by the grace of Jesus Christ. The debate about circumcision and the Law in the growing Christian community had created such division among believers that it threatened to implode Christianity.

In chapter 4, Paul reminds the Galatians that before they knew God, they had been slaves to pagan gods, and he asks them why they would want to be slaves once again now that God knows them (Galatians 4:8–9). Paul tells them they are not the children of bondage, but of freedom (4:31).

At-A-Glance

1. Be Not Entangled (Galatians 5:1–6)
2. Stay on the Right Course (vv. 7–12)
3. Called to Be Free (vv. 13–15)

In Depth

1. Be Not Entangled (Galatians 5:1–6)

Today's text begins in the middle of Paul's efforts to persuade the Galatians to stop following false teachers who want them to be subject to Mosaic Law. Paul urges the Galatians to stand firm in the freedom Christ has set before them. The yoke of bondage, a metaphor for the Law, is meant to illustrate that the Law stands in contrast to the yoke of Christ, which is easy and light (Matthew 11:29–30).

Anyone who accepts circumcision must observe the entire Law, "for whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). In this regard, those under the Law are in constant debt, because keeping all the statutes without fail is impossible. Paul writes that anyone seeking to be right with God through observing the Law has in fact "fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4). In essence, for those intending to follow the Law, the grace of Jesus Christ is useless to them because they have forsaken the advantages of His gift of grace. To persuade the Galatians to not be entangled by the Law, Paul explains that the Holy Spirit and faith, not the Law, make their relationships with God right (v. 5). He adds that in Christ, it is of no consequence whether one is circumcised, because what matters is faith manifested in love.

When Paul talks about those who have "fallen from grace," does he mean they have forfeited their salvation?

2. Stay on the Right Course (vv. 7–12)

In verse 7, Paul reminds the Galatians that when they were new believers, they were striving in the faith. However, false teachers wanted to divert them from truth. These people's plans are not the work of God, and their teachings do not reflect the foundation of Christianity. To illustrate the harm these false teachings could cause, Paul compares them to yeast, a fungus which, when a small amount is used, can spread throughout an entire loaf of dough. If these teachers' tongues were left unfettered, they could infect the whole church. However, Paul is confident God will keep the Galatians from believing their erroneous claims. Those trying to confuse them will have to contend with God's judgment for their behavior.

The false teachers were lying by telling the people that Paul had preached that circumcision was necessary to salvation (v. 11). Paul asks why he is still persecuted by Pharisees at the synagogues (2 Corinthians 11:24) and Jewish Christians who had once been Pharisees (Acts 15), if he had changed his teachings. If he had agreed with them, then the Cross of Christ would no longer be an obstacle for them (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). Out of his exasperation, Paul wishes that those insisting upon circumcision would fully castrate themselves. (Such a mutilation would bar them from Temple worship according to the full Law.)

What systems does your church have in place to remove false teaching and teachers before they can cause too much damage?

3. Called to Be Free (vv. 13–15)

Today's text ends with Paul again reminding the Galatians that they were called to be free and should not use their freedom as an opportunity to sin, but instead they should serve each other in love. For those still concerned with the Law, Paul writes that the whole Law is summed up in the command "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18). Engaging in conflict would only destroy their community. Paul beseeches the Galatians to live lives led by the Holy Spirit so they will not give in to their sinful nature. He explains that the desires of the flesh and the Spirit are constantly warring within believers, preventing us from doing what is right (cf. Romans 7:15–24).

How do you tell if you are succeeding at living by the Spirit?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is Paul against the practice of circumcision for believers (Galatians 5:2–4, 6)?
2. How should believers use their liberty (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What are some ways we try to work for salvation?
2. How can you discern whether you are working for salvation or walking in the Spirit?

Liberating Lesson

Our society is merit-based, meaning we perform to get rewards. We perform certain duties at work to get a raise. We must meet certain requirements to get As in school. Some even make grand gestures to win the heart of someone they love. We are enslaved by our own actions. It's a foreign concept that salvation is given by grace, not acts, but this is the gift of Christ. Allow this joyous news to shape how you interact with your faith and with every aspect of your life.

Application for Activation

It's a blessing to have the Holy Spirit guide us in the right direction. In your daily devotion, before sharing your petitions, ask God to help you be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. Study scriptural accounts of those who were Spirit-led to understand the ways He speaks to us (Acts 8:26–40; 15:5–29; 16:1–15). As you learn to recognize the urging of the Spirit, commit to following His guidance, even if it means you will be traveling outside of your comfort zone. It will be worth it.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Galatians 5:1–15

1. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

This is a connecting verse; it summarizes all that has been said and anticipates what will be said. There is greater clarity of thought when this verse is read as two separate statements. First is a statement emphasizing the method of God's saving act in Christ: "the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free." Second is a statement of entreaty, a plea or an appeal, based upon the purpose of God's saving activity: "Stand firm, therefore, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

The "yoke of slavery" was more than the "yoke" of the Jewish Law. The Gentile Christians were never under the "yoke" of the Jewish Law, but under paganism. Therefore, Paul uses the phrase "yoke of slavery" to mean "the elements of the world" (4:3) that he calls "weak and beggarly" (4:9). Both the Jewish Law and paganism were included in "the elements of the world" that rob people of their freedom in Christ. Another word to examine is "entangled" (Gk. enecho, en-EH-koh), meaning to be subject to or loaded down with. Paul says to not be loaded down or subjected again to the yoke of bondage.

2. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.

3. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.

The worldly entanglement Paul is most worried about in this letter is the Galatians' understanding of the place of circumcision in the Church. Since Christianity largely spread as an offshoot of Judaism, many thought one had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. For men, this would involve undergoing circumcision. Ever since the time of Abraham, Jewish males had been circumcised in infancy to mark them as part of the covenant community. It became such an important sign, however, that many thought one could not be justified before God without being circumcised. However, they did not take this reasoning to the next step.

Paul shows that if they assume circumcision justifies them and puts them in right standing before God, then "Christ shall profit you nothing." The inference is that the Gentile Christians had not yet been circumcised, but were seriously considering doing so. Paul's aim is to correct their thinking that circumcision justifies without offending the Jews for having been circumcised. It is helpful to read this verse in conjunction with some of Paul's other comments, where Paul shows that circumcision is not the issue (Romans 7:17–20). The issue lies in the mistaken notion that circumcision has value in salvation. The Greek word for "profit" is ophileo (oh-feh-LEH-oh), which means benefit, help, use, or aid. Paul states that if we rely on works and fulfillment of the Law for salvation, then we benefit nothing from Christ. The benefits we have in Him become void, and we find ourselves back under the entire Law.

Paul has already stated that to consent to circumcision is a confession that Christ's death has no saving value or power for Christian living. Now, he adds that to allow oneself to be circumcised is to

make oneself a “debtor” obligated to perform the duty of “the whole law.” James similarly states that breaking one law is the same as breaking the entire law (James 2:10). One cannot perform just part of the Law, because the entire body was written as a covenant between God and His people. Circumcision is only important as a sign of partaking in God’s covenants with Abraham and Moses. But Jesus came to save everyone, not just those who identify themselves with Abraham.

4. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

Paul has said that to put your trust in the Law means Christ has no benefit for you (v. 2). In this verse, Paul uses a different Greek word, *katargeo* (kah-tar-GEH-oh), meaning to make void or powerless or to nullify. He states that if one tries to practice both faith and the Law, they have nullified what Christ has done. To think that obeying the Law justifies us before God is to separate oneself from Christ, tantamount to falling from the grace of God. The choice is mutually exclusive: either give up legalism, choose grace, and live in the power of His might; or choose legalism, forfeit grace, and live life on your own. Definite and inevitable consequences follow each choice. Although many of the laws are generally beneficial to running a healthy society and faith community, Jesus fulfilled all the parts of the Law that provided for righteousness before God. Those who follow Jesus need not follow the Law because Jesus has already finished that part for us.

5. For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.

Paul identifies with the faithful in Galatia, including himself by saying “we” here. A paraphrase of Paul’s words would be, “We wait for the full realization of our salvation in the faith that we already have it.” This is implied by Paul’s use of the word “hope” from *elpis* (Gk. el-PEECE), which means an expectation for what has not happened yet. Another image helps to understand the full meaning of verse 5. The word “wait” is translated from *apekdechomai* (Gk. op-ek-DEH-kho-my) and refers to awaiting eagerly. This kind of waiting does not suggest sitting around with arms folded doing nothing. Rather, it conjures the image of a waiter in a restaurant, who is patiently and attentively serving, discharging the expectations of the job.

It is also important to note that this waiting is “through the Spirit”; we continue to be on the job, empowered by the Spirit, patiently serving our Lord with pleasure—in anticipation of the day when God “will render to every man according to his deeds” (Romans 2:6). At that time, true followers of Christ will be declared righteous by their faith, fulfilling their hope.

6. For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.

Under the Law, circumcision mattered, but under the freedom that comes through faith in Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters. The circumcised Jew and the uncircumcised Gentile share equal footing in the fellowship of those who are “in Jesus Christ” expressing the “faith which worketh by love.” Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision “availeth” anything, or has any capability (Gk. *ischuo*, is-CUE-oh; to have power or ability) with Christ. Instead, faith works through love. Love is the way that faith accomplishes God’s will. As we are told by James, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). All that matters in salvation is human sinfulness and divine grace.

7. Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?

Having stated his case, Paul now strings together a series of comments and questions in anticipation of a closing exhortation.

The sense of the Greek here is “You were running well; who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth.” “Obey” here is from the verb *peitho* (Gk. PAY-tho), which can also mean to be persuaded, comply with, believe, and rely on. Paul is not simply asking, “Who hindered you from obeying?” but rather, “Who hindered you from obeying and relying on the truth of which you have already been persuaded?” The question of “who” is obviously rhetorical in nature; Paul knows it was the Judaizers. They were guilty of “cutting in,” a phrase translating the Greek word *anakopto* (ah-nah-COP-toe). This word is used to refer to runners who come across their prescribed course and throw other participants off the track, too. It was also a military term used to refer to breaking up a road or erecting an obstacle to hinder or prevent the opposing army’s progress. The Galatians were familiar with these images and therefore understood Paul’s question. Paul anticipates and affirms their answer in the following verse.

8. This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you.

9. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

Paul reminds the Galatians that God calls them and is not the author of their confusion. It is interesting that Paul does not blame Satan for the Galatians’ confusion. It appears that Paul wants to keep the focus upon the false brethren who cut in and broke up the road that the Galatians were successfully traveling on.

Paul next uses a proverbial saying as a literary technique to call further attention to the corruptive influence of the Judaizers’ message. Jesus uses the image of “leaven” or yeast both positively and negatively. Once, it is a metaphor for the Kingdom of God, in that this small, invisible thing permeates something much larger than itself (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:21). He also uses the metaphor that Paul hints at here, disparaging the “leaven” of the Pharisees’ hypocritical doctrine (Matthew 16:12; Luke 12:1). Even if there are only a few of these Judaizers in Galatia, they can spoil the whole congregation. It is similar to the modern saying “One bad apple spoils the barrel.” Even though a single apple is small, it can affect an entire barrel’s worth of apples. The bad apple must be removed from the rest in order to keep them from spoiling too.

10. I have confidence in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded: but he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be.

Paul speaks now confidently that although the Gentile converts might be considering circumcision, his Galatian letter will hopefully cause them to recommit to faith in Christ alone. Paul’s confidence in them is “through the Lord”; he is confident of the Lord’s rule and reign in the lives of him and the Galatians. Paul calls out the man “that troubleth you.” The Greek word for “troubleth” is *tarasso* (tah-RAS-so), meaning to stir up, disturb, or throw into confusion. Paul is not just talking about someone being a pain, but about someone intentionally causing havoc. Probably feeling that his letter will not change his opponents, he leaves their fate to the divine judgment that their false message will inevitably incur.

11. And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the offence of the cross ceased.

12. I would they were even cut off which trouble you.

Paul again affirms that he does not preach the value of circumcision, responding to a specific charge from his opponents. The Judaizers could have tried to claim Paul was on their side, pointing out Paul's association with Timothy's circumcision (Acts 16:3). They could also reference Paul's being circumcised (Philippians 3:5). However, Paul refutes the suggestion that he now preaches circumcision. He implies that doing so would make his life a lot easier, because then the Cross of Christ would cease to offend so many and Paul would not suffer some of the persecution that followed him wherever he preached the Gospel.

The tone of Paul's Greek is harsh. What Paul says is a terrible thing to wish on anyone: that instead of just circumcising themselves, they should castrate themselves fully. For a Jew to be castrated, however, would undo all the benefit circumcision was supposed to offer. In Mosaic Law, those with a severed or wounded penis would be barred from the congregation of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:1). If we assume that the Galatians were familiar with this Scripture, we can also assume that they would have heard Paul's harsh comment as a wish that the Judaizers remove or sever themselves from the Christian community. The harshness of Paul's language helps us understand the depth of his disagreement with the Judaizers' message.

13. For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

14. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

Whereas Paul has been concerned about the threat of the Judaizers, here he shifts focus to the threat of the flesh or the Galatians' misuse of their Christian freedom. Paul frames his concern by saying two things about the Galatian Christians: first, that they "have been called," and second, that that calling is "unto liberty." Previously, Paul has spoken about the Galatians' "call" with the emphasis on the "call of God" (Galatians 1:6; 5:8). The liberty the Galatians have been called to is Christian freedom. In other words, God has called the Galatians to be free from the elements of the world so as to be free to live for Him. This call by God is the essence of Christian freedom and therefore has ethical implications. In other words, Christian freedom, more than being a good end, is really a means for fulfilling God's will and lovingly serving one's neighbor. Christian freedom provides both the opportunity and possibility to serve ethical ends. The balance of verse 13 gives focus to the ethical implications. As the Galatians are warned not to use their Christian freedom to serve their selfish, corrupt, sinful desires (i.e., the flesh, Gk. *sarx*, SARKS), but rather they are to serve the will of God by lovingly serving one another and thus—in the spirit of Jesus— fulfill the Law. Paul seems to make a distinction between doing the Law as required by those "under the law" and fulfilling the Law which is the result of living "in Christ." Those who live in the realm of Christian freedom obey not because the Law commands, but because of their love of Christ who set an example for us. Therefore a Christian obeys the Law, but not simply because it is the law, but because it will please God. Paul tries to calm fears about which parts or how much of the Law is required of Christians by explaining what had long been known in the Jewish community and what Jesus Himself had said: that the entire Law really boils down to "love thy neighbor as thyself." As the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) teaches, "thy neighbor" is anyone a Christian comes in contact with, anyone on whom you can show mercy—including the person who lives next door.

15. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.

Here Paul highlights the consequences of failure to make doing God's will and loving others the aim of Christian living. Paul uses a conditional clause, saying that if you do such and such, this might happen. He warns the church not to bite and devour one another. The Greek word for bite here is generally used for snakes. The word for devour is *katēstho* (Gk. kah-tess-THEE-oh), meaning to eat up, consume, or tear to pieces; this word is often used for beasts. In other words, Paul is warning them that they were fighting like wild animals, and if they did not stop, they would all be consumed—thus the preceding admonition to love one another, fulfilling the Law (v. 14).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Children and Heirs through God
(Galatians 4:1-7)

TUESDAY

Authentic Circumcision
(Philippians 3:1-8)

WEDNESDAY

Press toward the Goal
(Philippians 3:8-14)

THURSDAY

Let Us Love One Another
(1 John 4:7-13)

FRIDAY

Love and Pray for Your Enemies
(Matthew 5:43-48)

SATURDAY

Avoid Strife; Love Always
(Proverbs 17:13-17)

SUNDAY

Faith Working through Love
(Galatians 5:1-15)