

Freedom *in* Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 5:1–15; 1 Cor. 6:20; Rom. 8:1; Heb. 2:14, 15; Rom. 8:4; 13:8.*

Memory Text: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (*Galatians 5:13, ESV*).

In Galatians 2:4, Paul briefly referred to the importance of protecting the “freedom” that we have in Christ Jesus. But what does Paul mean when he speaks about “freedom,” which he so often does? What does this freedom include? How far does this freedom go? Does it have any limits? And what connection does freedom in Christ have to the law?

Paul addresses these questions by warning the Galatians of two dangers. The first is legalism. Paul’s opponents in Galatia were so caught up trying to earn God’s favor through their behavior that they lost sight of the liberating nature of Christ’s work, of the salvation that they already had in Christ through faith. The second threat is the tendency to abuse the freedom Christ has obtained for us by lapsing into licentiousness. Those who hold this view mistakenly assume that freedom is antithetical to the law.

Both legalism and licentiousness are opposed to freedom, because they equally keep their adherents in a form of slavery. Paul’s appeal to the Galatians, however, is to stand firm in the true freedom that is their rightful possession in Christ.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 10.*

Christ Has Set Us Free

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

Like the rallying command of a military leader to his wavering troops, Paul charges the Galatians not to surrender their freedom in Christ. The forcefulness and intensity of Paul’s tone cause his words nearly to leap off the page into action. In fact, this seems to be exactly what Paul intended. Although this verse is connected thematically to what precedes and what follows, its abruptness and lack of syntactical connections in Greek suggest that Paul wanted this verse to stand out like a gigantic billboard. Freedom in Christ sums up Paul’s entire argument, and the Galatians were in danger of giving it away.

Read Galatians 1:3, 4; 2:16; and 3:13. What are some of the metaphors used in these verses, and how do they help us understand what Christ has done for us?

Paul’s words, “for freedom Christ has set us free” (*Gal. 5: 1, ESV*), may suggest that he has another metaphor in mind here. The wording of this phrase is similar to the formula used in the sacred freeing (*manumission*) of slaves. Because slaves had no legal rights, it was supposed that a deity could purchase their freedom, and in return, the slave, though really free, would legally belong to the god. Of course, in actual practice the process was fiction; it was the slave who paid the money into the temple treasury for his or her freedom. Consider, for example, the formula used in one of the nearly one thousand inscriptions found at the temple to Pythian Apollo at Delphi that date from 201 B.C. to A.D. 100: “ ‘For Freedom, Apollo the Pythian bought from Sosibus of Amphissa a female slave whose name is Nicaea. . . . The purchase, however, Nicaea has committed unto Apollo for freedom.’ ”—Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 340.

This formula shares a basic similarity with Paul’s terminology, but there is a fundamental difference. In Paul’s metaphor, no fiction is involved. We did not provide the purchase price ourselves (*1 Cor. 6:20, 7:23*). The price was far too high for us. We were powerless to save ourselves, but Jesus stepped in and did for us what we could not do (at least not without forfeiting our lives). He paid the penalty for our sins, thus freeing us from condemnation.

Look at your own life. Do you ever think that you could save yourself? What should your answer tell you about how grateful you need to be for what we have been given in Jesus?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Galatians 5:13*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Discuss how true freedom in Christ escapes both legalism and licentiousness.

Feel: Sense the stirring joy that freedom in Christ brings.

Do: Spring into loving service that is born through faith in the one who is united to Christ.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: True Freedom

A How does faith in Christ set us free? What and whom are we free from?

B What are we called to do with our freedom?

C How does our freedom in Christ result in “fulfillment” of the law, as opposed to “doing” the law?

II. Feel: Joyful Freedom

A How does freedom from bondage to sin, death, and the devil affect our attitudes and relationships to others?

B How do we express our joy in our worship to the One who freed us and empowers us to live a life of faith?

C How is joy related to faith?

III. Do: Active Freedom

A If we are truly free because we are united to Christ through faith, how is our resulting joy and love expressed through service to others?

B How is our labor of love, which results from our relationship with Christ, different from labor designed to bring us into Christ’s favor?

► **Summary:** Freedom born from faith in Christ liberates us from slavery to sin, death, and the devil. We are free to express our faith in Christ through loving and joyful service, thereby fulfilling the law which enjoins us to “love others as yourself.”

The Nature of Christian Freedom

Paul's command to stand firm in freedom is not made in isolation. An important statement of fact precedes it: "Christ has set us free." Why should Christians stand firmly in their freedom? Because Christ has already set them free. In other words, our freedom is a result of what Christ has already done for us.

This pattern of a statement of fact followed by an exhortation is typical in Paul's letters (*1 Cor. 6:20; 10:13, 14; Col. 2:6*). For example, Paul makes several indicative statements in Romans 6 about the facts of our condition in Christ, such as, "We know that our old self was crucified with him" (*Rom. 6:6, ESV*). On the basis of this fact, Paul can then issue the imperative exhortation, "Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies" (*Rom. 6:12, NRSV*). This is Paul's way of saying essentially, "Become what you already are in Christ." The ethical life of the gospel does not present the burden of trying to do things in order to prove that we are God's children. Rather, we do what we do because we already are His children.

From what has Christ freed us? *Rom. 6:14, 18; 8:1; Gal. 4:3, 8; 5:1; Heb. 2:14, 15.*

The use of the word *freedom* to describe the Christian life is more prominent in Paul's letters than anywhere else in the New Testament. The word *freedom* and its cognates occur 28 times in Paul's letters, in contrast to only 13 times elsewhere.

What does Paul mean by freedom? First, it is not a mere abstract concept. It does not refer to political freedom, economic freedom, or the freedom to live any way we might please. On the contrary, it is a freedom that is grounded in our relationship to Jesus Christ. The context suggests that Paul is referring to freedom from the bondage and condemnation of a law-driven Christianity, but our freedom includes much more. It includes freedom from sin, eternal death, and the devil.

"Outside of Jesus Christ, human existence is characterized as bondage—bondage to the law, bondage to the evil elements dominating the world, bondage to sin, the flesh, and the devil. God sent his Son into the world to shatter the dominion of these slave-holders."—Timothy George, *Galatians*, p. 354.

To what things do you feel enslaved in life? Memorize Galatians 5:1 and ask God to make the freedom you have in Christ a reality in your life.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Christ’s sacrifice releases us from bondage to sin so that we may freely choose Christ and His lifestyle.

Countercultural icon Bob Dylan wailed, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Dylan’s sentiment is correct. While “no man can serve two masters,” everyone serves one. Christian freedom must be understood within this context. There is no spiritual Switzerland—neutral territory inclined neither right nor left. We are on one side or the other in the great controversy. To choose not to choose is to make a choice, the *wrong* choice. Through His death on the cross, Christ has paved the way for all the world to have salvation, freedom, and victory in Him. Yet, we have to be careful. First, millions of freed slaves have willingly returned to slavery. Christ unlocked the penitentiary, shattering prison gates and destroying prison walls, but many prisoners remained there by choice. Second, others escaped but carried an invisible prison with them. Their prison consists of doubts, shame, fearfulness, and guilt. They serve God motivated by fear rather than love. They serve Jonathan Edwards’ angry God: “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.”—Clyde E. Fant, Jr., and William M. Pinson, Jr., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1971), vol. 3, p. 63. Fortunately millions have also accepted the freedom purchased at the exorbitant price of Christ’s life. Released from guilt, shame, haunting memories, addictions, and self-destructive behaviors, they enjoy the abundant life provided by their Creator.

Discuss: How do we flourish within the context of loving obedience and revel in the adventure of passionate and compassionate service to God?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Freedom is simultaneously the world’s greatest blessing and its greatest curse. Freedom must be measured by outcomes. How is freedom exercised? Freedom expresses special privileges or rights of access proceeding from citizenship. What, then, constitutes heavenly citizenship? How are citizenship and freedom acquired or forfeited?

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The Dangerous Consequences of Legalism *(Gal. 5:2–12)*

The way in which Paul introduces Galatians 5:2–12 indicates the importance of what he is about to say. “Look” (*ESV*), “Listen!” (*NRSV*), “Mark my words!” (*NIV*), “I, Paul, say to you” (*ESV*). Paul is not fooling around. By his forceful use of the word *look*, he not only calls for his readers’ full attention, but he even evokes his apostolic authority. He wants them to understand that if the Gentiles are going to submit to circumcision to be saved, then the Galatians need to realize the dangerous consequences involved in their decision.

Read Galatians 5:2–12. What does Paul warn about in regard to the whole question of circumcision?

The first consequence of trying to earn God’s favor by submitting to circumcision is that it obligates the person to keep the entire law. Paul’s language in verses 2 and 3 includes an interesting play on words. Christ, he says, will not benefit them (*opheleseis*); rather, they will be obligated (*opheiletes*) to the law. If a person wants to live according to the law, he or she cannot just pick and choose the precepts to follow. It is all or nothing.

Second, they will be “cut off” from Christ. A decision to be justified by works involves at the same time a rejection of God’s way of justification in Christ. “You cannot have it both ways. It is impossible to receive Christ, thereby acknowledging that you cannot save yourself, and then receive circumcision, thereby claiming that you can.” —John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1968), p. 133.

Paul’s third objection to circumcision is that it hinders spiritual growth. His analogy is of a runner whose progress toward the finish line has been deliberately sabotaged. In fact, the word translated “hindered” (*vs. 7, ESV*) was used in military circles to refer “to breaking up a road or destroying a bridge or placing obstacles in the way of an enemy, to halt his advance.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 978.

Finally, circumcision removes the offense of the Cross. How? The message of circumcision implies that you can save yourself; as such, it is flattering to human pride. The message of the Cross, however, is offensive to human pride, because we have to acknowledge that we are dependent completely on Christ.

Paul is so outraged at these people for their insistence on circumcision that he says that he wishes that the knife would slip and they would castrate themselves! Strong words, but Paul’s tone simply reflects how seriously he views this issue.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

What rights and obligations accompany citizenship? How does the believer utilize freedom? What might believers do that would compromise or eventually forfeit their freedoms? How should Christians avoid both legalistic, fear-driven religion, and anything-goes, licentious philosophy? These questions constitute not mere discussion points but critical issues central to emotional stability and abundant living.


Bible Commentary

I. The Nature of Christian Freedom *(Review Romans 6:6, 12 with the class.)*

Over the centuries, Jewish religion had become encrusted beneath layers of well-intentioned human tradition. The well-intentioned aspect must not be overlooked, lest modern believers repeat those same mistakes. The first mistake was miscalculating the relationship between worshiper and covenant. Rather than worshipping God motivated by gratitude for redemption and creation, the people offered worship on the foundation of fearful obligation. Their observations were not flawed, but their interpretation was. They observed that whenever the nation lived harmoniously with God's principles, the nation prospered. They interpreted this as the divine payment for acceptable service. They reasoned that whenever their service became unacceptable, God would withdraw divine favor, and punishment would follow. This thinking produced legalistic mind-sets and practices that destroyed concepts of a loving heavenly Father who desired intimate fellowship with His earthly children. Service was rendered to avoid punishment or to obtain reward. Loving service offered from hearts appreciative for God's gracious goodness was largely, but not completely, unknown.

Paul's new covenant message, following Jeremiah's ancient prophecy of internalized devotion, rooted in love rather than fear, constituted spiritual release for Paul's contemporaries and Christians of every generation. Christian freedom includes release from base impulses, hereditary tendencies, every kind of temptation, and, naturally, the consequences of indulging those impulses and tendencies. Christ's indwelling Spirit releases us from both legalism and licentiousness.

Consider This: Throughout history sincere attempts have been made to regulate human behavior in order to appease God. Pharisaical regulations governing Sabbath observance were a prime example. These were well-intended and perfectly acceptable as individual expressions of devotion. However, when these personal preferences regarding the

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Liberty Not Licentiousness (*Gal. 5:13*)

Galatians 5:13 marks an important turning point in the book of Galatians. Whereas up to this point Paul has focused entirely on the theological content of his message, he now turns to the issue of Christian behavior. How should a person who is not saved by works of law live?

What potential misuse of freedom did Paul want to keep the Galatians from committing? *Gal. 5:13*.

Paul was well aware of the potential misunderstanding that accompanied his emphasis on the grace and the freedom that believers have in Christ (*Rom. 3:8; 6:1, 2*). The problem, however, was not Paul's gospel but the human tendency for self-indulgence. The pages of history are littered with the stories of people, cities, and nations whose corruption and descent into moral chaos were directly related to their lack of self-control. Who hasn't felt this tendency in his or her own life, as well? That's why Paul so clearly calls followers of Jesus to avoid indulging in the flesh. In fact, he wants them to do the opposite, which is "through love serve one another" (*NKJV*). As anyone who serves others out of love knows, this is something that can be done only through death to self, death to the flesh. Those who indulge their own flesh are not the ones who tend to serve others. On the contrary.

Thus, our freedom in Christ is not merely a freedom from the enslavement to the world but a call to a new type of service, the responsibility to serve others out of love. It is "the opportunity to love the neighbor without hindrance, the possibility of creating human communities based on mutual self-giving rather than the quest for power and status."—Sam K. Williams, *Galatians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 145.

Because of our familiarity with Christianity and the wording of modern translations of Galatians 5:13, it is easy to overlook the startling power these words would have conveyed to the Galatians. First, the Greek language indicates that the love that motivates this type of service is not ordinary human love—that would be impossible; human love is far too conditional. Paul's use of the article (*the*) before the word *love* in Greek indicates he is referring to "the" divine love that we receive only through the Spirit (*Rom. 5:5*). The real surprise lies in the fact that the word translated as "serve" is the Greek word for "to be enslaved." Our freedom is not for self-autonomy but for mutual enslavement to one another based on God's love.

Be honest: have you ever thought you could use the freedom you have in Christ to indulge in a little bit of sin here and there? What's so detrimental about that kind of thinking?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

allowable Sabbath traveling distance, and so on, became laws restricting others' choices, they led to legalism. Knowing that every facet of life leads toward or away from God, some well-intentioned modern believers have legislated dress, diet, leisure, and other aspects of living. How should Christians respond to attempts by other Christians to legislate their conduct? How can well-intentioned believers honor their conscientious convictions without trying to impose them upon others? Why might some substitute legislation for prayerful searching of Scripture and confidence in the power of the indwelling Spirit? How might "majoring on minors" compromise our spiritual authority when, at other times, indisputable sinful behavior requires confrontation and correction? How might quietly modeling our understanding of appropriate Christian behavior and passionately loving others be more effective in promoting our views as compared with trying to legislate them?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Christian freedom means receiving a new nature that institutes an internal transformation of behavior rather than an external regulation of behavior. The bicycle's chain attaches to the rear sprocket and, from the center of the radiating spokes, transfers power that mobilizes the entire bicycle. Some motion could be accomplished by turning the tire outside the rim, but such motion is superficial when compared with the power radiating from the centered sprocket. Civil government does bear some responsibility for regulating society so that such egregious evils as violence, robbery, and so on will not go unchecked; but history has shown that spiritual revival is exponentially more effective in transforming behavior than is imprisonment and punishment. The Holy Spirit's power, radiating from the completely surrendered heart, is humanity's only realistic hope for lasting transformation and survival.

Activity: Read the following parable aloud and discuss the implications for making Christian freedom real in the believer's experience.

The Airplane's Soliloquy

They finally released me from ground school. I'm free to soar, explore, and reach my destiny. Speaking of destinations, I'm free to go anywhere. What an adventure! Think: exotic destinations never even dreamed about

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Fulfilling the Whole Law (*Gal. 5:13–15*)

How do you reconcile Paul’s negative comments about “do[ing] the whole law” (*Gal. 5:3*) with his positive statement about “fulfill[ing] all the law” (*Gal. 5:14*)? Compare *Rom. 10:5*; *Gal. 3:10, 12*; *5:3* with *Rom. 8:4*; *13:8*; *Gal. 5:14*.

Many have seen the contrast between Paul’s negative comments about “doing the whole law” and his positive assertions about “fulfilling the whole law” as paradoxical. They really aren’t. The solution lies in the fact that Paul intentionally uses each phrase to make an important distinction between two different ways of defining Christian behavior in relation to the law. For example, it is significant that when Paul refers positively to Christian observance of the law, he never describes it as “doing the law.” He reserves that phrase to refer solely to the misguided behavior of those who are living under the law and are trying to earn God’s approval by “doing” what the law commands.

This is not to imply that those who have found salvation in Christ do not obey. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul says they “fulfill” the law. He means that true Christian behavior is much more than the outward obedience of just “doing” the law; it “fulfills” the law. Paul uses the word *fulfill* because it goes far beyond just “doing.” This type of obedience is rooted in Jesus (*see Matt. 5:17*). It is not an abandonment of the law, nor a reduction of the law only to love, but it is the way through which the believer can experience the true intent and meaning of the whole law!

Where, according to Paul, is the full meaning of the law found? *Lev. 19:18*; *Mark 12:31, 33*; *Matt. 19:19*; *Rom. 13:9*; *James 2:8*.

Although it is a quotation from Leviticus, Paul’s statement in Galatians is ultimately rooted in Jesus’ use of Leviticus 19:18. Jesus, however, was not the only Jewish teacher to refer to Leviticus 19:18 as a summary of the whole law. Rabbi Hillel, who lived about a generation before Jesus, said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole law.” But Jesus’ perspective radically was different (*Matt. 7:12*). Not only is it more positive, but it also demonstrates that law and love are not incompatible. Without love, the law is empty and cold; without law, love has no direction.

What’s easier, and why: to love others or simply to obey the Ten Commandments? Bring your answer to class.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

before; searching endless horizons, tasting tantalizing sunsets in paradise, navigating the outer limits of known civilization. What possibilities! Maybe I'll survey Iceland for starters. Of course, the regulatory agency is recommending otherwise because of a volcanic eruption. Some commission decided that it's dangerous because previous airplanes stalled on microscopic dust found in volcanic clouds. Maybe they're just saying that to drive people away from the fun. Where's their proof? It's just small stuff anyway. How much harm could that be? There are those stories about that small stuff hardening and clogging engines; but just because other airplanes haven't been able to handle it doesn't necessarily mean I'm not built strong enough. Then again, why chance it? Maybe waiting makes sense. There are dozens of other exciting options. Maybe the commission does know what it's talking about this time. I'm free to travel Iceland, but there's Newfoundland, the Pyrenees, the Solomons, plus the Mediterranean. Besides, my manufacturer invested endless hours of research and development to produce me. I'm actually free. That means I can choose.

Discussion Points: When Christians utilize freedom, how should they view the *small stuff*? How could careless self-confidence bring about disaster? How should appreciation for God's investment in the believer affect his or her attitude about using freedom? How might studying the examples of freedom contained in Scripture help us make profitable decisions?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: **Despite what we have been given in Christ, somehow the liberated have often sided with their captor rather than their liberator. Christians must counteract this travesty by becoming heaven's agents, exemplifying lives transformed by divine grace. By becoming examples of properly exercised freedom, believers demonstrate God's wisdom in liberating prisoners rather than in manufacturing robots to worship Him.**

Activity: *Option A.* Invite the class to make lists of choices that they or their friends make that may affect their spirituality. Allow them to reflect openly about how misused freedom could inhibit their growth in these areas.

Option B. Study the Christmas songs found in the hymnal. Look for allusions to freedom. Discuss how Christ's incarnation provided spiritual freedom for His followers. What might the lyrics suggest about how Christians appropriate the freedoms that Jesus purchased at such a high price?

Further Study: “Genuine faith always works by love. When you look to Calvary it is not to quiet your soul in the nonperformance of duty, not to compose yourself to sleep, but to create faith in Jesus, faith that will work, purifying the soul from the slime of selfishness. When we lay hold of Christ by faith, our work has just begun. Every man has corrupt and sinful habits that must be overcome by vigorous warfare. Every soul is required to fight the fight of faith. If one is a follower of Christ, he cannot be sharp in deal, he cannot be hardhearted, devoid of sympathy. He cannot be coarse in his speech. He cannot be full of pomposity and self-esteem. He cannot be overbearing, nor can he use harsh words, and censure and condemn.

“The labor of love springs from the work of faith. Bible religion means constant work. ‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.’ ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.’ We are to be zealous of good works; be careful to maintain good works. And the true Witness says, ‘I know thy works.’

“While it is true that our busy activities will not in themselves ensure salvation, it is also true that faith which unites us to Christ will stir the soul to activity (MS 16, 1890).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1111.

Discussion Questions:

- ① As a class, go over your answers to the last question from Thursday’s lesson. Which option did most people find easier, and why? What important truths does your answer suggest to you about what it means to fulfill the law?
- ② Paul says that faith “works” through love. What does he mean?
- ③ Examine the idea of seeking to use your freedom in Christ to indulge in sin. Why is that so easy to do? When people think that way, what trap are they falling into? See 1 John 3:8.

Summary: *Freedom* is one of Paul’s favorite words for defining the gospel. It includes both what Christ has done for us in freeing us from bondage to the world and also how we are called to live the Christian life. We need to be careful, however, that our liberty does not fall prey either to legalism or licentiousness. Christ did not set us free so that we could serve ourselves but so that we might give our lives in ministry to our neighbors.