

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 does so often? 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, in the salvation that they already had in Christ through faith. The second threat is the tendency to abuse the freedom Christ has purchased for us by lapsing into licentiousness. Those who hold this view mistakenly assume that freedom is antithetical to the law.

In actuality, 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, September 9.

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 intends. Although this verse is connected thematically to what precedes and what follows, its abruptness and lack of syntactical connections in Greek suggest that Paul wants this verse to stand out like a gigantic billboard. Freedom in Christ sums up Paul’s entire argument, and the Galatians are 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 slaves, 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 that date from 201 B.C. to A.D. 100 at the temple to Pythian Apollo at Delphi: “‘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. Although we were powerless to save ourselves, 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 Nature of Christian Freedom

Paul's command to stand firmly in freedom is not made in isolation. An important statement of fact precedes it: "Christ has set us free." So 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 us with 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.

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

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*), and “I, Paul, say to you” (*ESV*). By his forceful words, he not only calls for his readers’ full attention, but he 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 consequences 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, the person 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: Inter-Varsity 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” (*Gal. 5:7, 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 completely dependent on Christ.

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

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

Galatians 5:13 marks an important turning point in the book. 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 related directly 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, as human love is far too conditional. Paul's use of the definite 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, though, lies in the fact that the word translated as "serve" is the Greek word for "to be enslaved." Our freedom, then, 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 bad about that kind of thinking?

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* and *Gal. 3:10, 12; 5:3* with *Rom. 8:4; 13:8* and *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 living under the law who 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 about 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; it is the way through which the believer could 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 was radically different (*Matt. 7:12*). Not only was it more positive, but it also demonstrated that law and love are not incompatible. Without love, the law is empty and cold; without law, love has no direction.

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

Further Thought: “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 study. 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, however, 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.