

Galatians—Grace Above the Law
Our Freedom in Christ

LESSON 8—Galatians 5.1-15

Sanctification by the Spirit

After living twenty-five years in the same house, my wife and I finally bought what was for us our dream home. The realtor told us the house was absolutely perfect except it may need a new water heater. After exactly one week there was no denying that the dark rust red water coming out of the faucet necessitated a new water heater. Knowing my family's inclination for long showers, I bought the largest (and heaviest) water heater known to man. Fortunately, my son volunteered to come over and help me install it since it seemed to weigh about the same as my SUV. After the new water heater was carried into the garage by both of us, the moment of truth arrived. The final reckoning required one person to get into a narrow space between the new appliance and the wall to lift it into place. My son quickly offered to take the load and do the heavy lifting but my pride was not willing to relinquish control and admit I needed his help and said, "No, I've got this." Once I was in position and the water heater was tipped onto me I quickly realized "No, I don't got this." Because only one person could be in position to take the weight and I had pridefully refused his gracious offer for help, I was squished like a bug between the water heater and the wall and no amount of squirming or screaming could remedy my plight.

In reading Paul's final exhortation to the Galatians, he explains that there is room for only one person to carry the weight of our sins. It can't be both Jesus and us through our good works. Just like in the installation of my water heater, we can foolishly say, "I've got this" and try to carry the full weight ourselves, or we can fully trust Jesus and allow Him to carry the weight we cannot bear.

In the first two sections of this epistle, Paul establishes his credentials and delves deeply into the theological basis of our salvation. In the third and final section of the letter, he moves to the application of these truths in the lives of followers of Jesus Christ. Above the entrance to the oldest school in my area is a loose paraphrase of Proverbs 4:7, “With All Thy Knowledge—Get Understanding.” This speaks to the issue, moving from a head to a heart knowledge in the application of God’s Word.

Some have mistakenly believed that the freedom or liberty Paul mentions in Galatians 5:1 is freedom to sin. Because of our free will, we have always been free to choose sin, but it is only through faith in Christ alone that we have been freed from the bondage of sin—meaning we are no longer obligated to sin. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, taught that our conduct or walk matters and gives evidence to the spiritual condition underneath: *“So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits”* (Matthew 7:17–20, ESV).

From the first part of this epistle we have learned that it is impossible to overcome the flesh with the flesh. In other words, living a sinless life through our own discipline and self-control just isn’t possible. However, living a Spirit-controlled life through faith in Jesus will produce the good fruit mentioned by Jesus and detailed by Paul in this chapter. We can say, “No thanks. I’ve got it” and fail in our efforts to attain holiness, or we can, moment-by-moment through prayer and trust, yield to the control of the Holy Spirit and be sanctified. This anonymous poem clearly lays out our options:

*“Two hearts beat within my chest,
One is cursed, the other is blessed.
One I love, the other I hate.
The one I feed will dominate.”*

Prayer

Start by praying over the passage and asking the Holy Spirit to give you fresh insights and wisdom in understanding it. Then read through the entire passage two or three times.

Scripture Meditation/Memorization

One of the most fundamental and rewarding Christian disciplines that pays back in full spiritual dividends is Bible meditation/memorization. It is an absolutely fundamental in the formation of your spiritual development, spiritual walk and faith growth. In Psalm 1:1-2 (NLT), the Psalmist warrior, King David said,

*“Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers.
But they delight in the law of the Lord,
meditating on it day and night.”*

Use the suggested verse(s) to meditate on during the course of this week's study.

Memory Verse

“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)

Galatians 5:1-6—Christian Liberty

You could easily break the Book of Galatians into three parts. The first two chapters dealt largely with a defense of Paul's apostleship, the next two chapters taught justification is by faith alone, and the final two chapters are the application of Sola fide (justification by faith alone) to practical Christian living.

1. Verse 1 gives believers two imperatives. What are they?

2. Paul proclaims our freedom (ESV) or liberty (NKJV) in Christ from bondage. To what bondage is he referring in verse 1?

3. Circumcision neither commends nor condemns us to God. Paul had Timothy circumcised to not offend the Jews with whom they shared the gospel (Acts 16:1–3).

a. What is the problem with those demanding the circumcision of new Gentile converts? (See verses 2–4).

b. What additional insights can you glean from Romans 9:30–32?

c. What is Paul’s final conclusion on circumcision in verse 6?

Galatians 5:7-15—*Love Fulfills the Law*

Like a shepherd protecting his flock against ravenous predators, Paul aggressively attacks the Judaizers in this passage. Realizing their potential damage, Paul, in verse 12, goes so far as to say that if they advise Gentiles to be circumcised he wished the Judaizers wouldn’t stop there but would castrate (NRSV) themselves. A little background is helpful in understanding what is meant by his attack. Galatia was one of the centers for the worship of the Roman goddess Cybele (Magna Mater–Great Mother). Cybele’s priests and most devout followers would become eunuchs to earn her favor. Paul’s inference is that like the pagan worshipers trying to gain the favor of their goddess by self-mutilation, the Judaizers should do the same and not stop at mere circumcision.

1. One of the serious dangers for believers is small doctrinal errors, which are allowed to slip into a fellowship. These errors when compounded and unchecked will lead to spiritual apostasy.

a. What does Paul say about this in verses 7–9?

b. What is the leaven spoken of in verse 9? (Matthew 16:12 will help.)

c. What warning on this subject does the writer of Hebrews provide us in Hebrews 2:1?

d. How can we best prevent spiritual “drift” of ourselves, families, and our fellowship?

2. It appears as if the Judaizers have made two false claims to undermine Paul and the authority of his teaching.

a. The Judaizers appear to claim that Paul still preached circumcision (which would have been true before his conversion). How did he answer their charge in verses 11–12?

b. They made a charge that believers if not required to keep the law are free to sin as much as they please.

i. How does Paul answer that in verses 13–14?

ii. What else does Paul say about this in Romans 6:1–4?

3. **“The ‘flesh’ in the language of the Apostle Paul is not what clothes our bony skeleton, but our fallen human nature, which we inherited from our parents and they inherited from theirs, and which is twisted with self-centeredness and therefore prone to sin. We are not to use our Christian freedom to indulge this ‘flesh’, ‘as an opportunity for the flesh’. The Greek word here translated ‘opportunity’ (aphorme) is used in military contexts for a place from which an offensive is launched, a base of operations. It therefore means a vantage-ground, and so an opportunity or pretext. Thus our freedom in Christ is not to be used as a pretext for self-indulgence. Christian freedom is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin. It is an unrestricted liberty of approach to God as His children, not an unrestricted liberty to wallow in our own selfishness.”¹*

a. What does Paul mean by ‘opportunity for the flesh’ in verse 13?

b. In what way are you prone to misuse your Christian freedom in this way?

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians, The Bible Speaks Today* commentary, pg. 140, Inter-Varsity Press-USA, 1986

c. What does Paul suggest as a possible antidote?

4. How does Paul summarize the law in verse 14? How does this compare to the words of Jesus in the following verses?

a. Matthew 7:12

b. Matthew 22:36–40

5. By contrast, what will be the outcome if we live under the law trying to outperform others and hoping that God will judge us based upon some sort of grading curve (verse 15)?

6. *What are some ways in which the misuse of Christian freedom could lead to self-indulgence?²

² Question taken from Galatians—Experiencing the Grace of Christ, John Stott Bible Studies, InterVarsity Press-USA, 1998

7. *How have you been “running the good race” in your life (v. 7)?³

a. If you’ve been tripped up in the past, what caused that?

b. What are some practical steps you can take to minimize the chances of being tripped up by these things again?

8. *How could freedom degenerate to Christians attacking one another (v.15)?⁴

Lesson 8 Summary/Take Away

If one of your friends at work or a neighbor were to ask you what you did on Tuesday, you would tell them you went to a Bible study. The next question would likely be, “What did you learn?” We often summarize an entire athletic contest or a movie in a few brief sentences and easily convey the essence of the event. Now apply these same skills to give a summary of the passage in a sentence or two. Then, in an additional sentence or two, describe what impact this passage will have on how you live.

³ Question taken from The Wiersbe Bible Study Series: Galatians, published by David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, CO, 2010

⁴ Question taken from Galatians—Experiencing the Grace of Christ, John Stott Bible Studies, InterVarsity Press-USA, 1998

Memory Verse

“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)

Key Words/Phrases

Write out the definition of these key words. You can use a regular dictionary or go to one of the Greek sources listed in the Tool Box at the end of the study. You may also use a concordance to see where else and how the word is used in the Bible. *How would these phrases instruct or encourage us today?*

Christ Has Redeemed Us (Galatians 3:13)
