

Freedom in Christ



SABBATH—DECEMBER 3

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 5:1–15; 1 Corinthians 6:20; Romans 8:1; Hebrews 2:14, 15; Romans 8:4; Romans 13:8.

MEMORY VERSE: “My brothers and sisters, you were chosen to be free. But don’t [do not] use your freedom as an excuse to live in sin. Instead, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13, NIV).

IN GALATIANS 2:4, PAUL SPEAKS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING THE “FREEDOM” THAT WE HAVE IN CHRIST JESUS. He often speaks about this “freedom.” But what does Paul mean? 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 answers these questions by warning the Galatians of two dangers. The first is legalism.¹ Paul’s enemies in Galatia have been trying so hard to earn God’s favor through their works that they have overlooked the fact that Christ’s gift offers freedom to sinners. This gift is the salvation that the Galatians already had in Christ through faith. The second threat is the abuse of the freedom Christ has purchased for us. The Galatians were in danger of abusing their freedom by falling into licentiousness.²

Both legalism and licentiousness threaten freedom. This is because they equally keep their followers in some kind of slavery. Paul begs the Galatians to stand firm in the true freedom in Christ.

1. legalism—the belief that salvation can be earned by obeying the law.

2. licentiousness—sexual behavior or conduct (acts) that breaks God’s law.

SUNDAY—DECEMBER 4**“CHRIST HAS SET US FREE”
(Galatians 5:1, NIV)**

Like a general shouting encouragement to his weakening army, Paul commands the Galatians not to surrender their freedom in Christ. Paul's strong language causes his words nearly to jump off the page into action. In fact, this seems to be exactly what Paul has planned for his words to do. This verse is connected to the theme of what comes beforehand and what follows. But both its suddenness and its break from the Greek grammar suggest that Paul wants this verse to stand out like a big billboard. Freedom in Christ sums up Paul's entire argument. And the Galatians are in danger of throwing that freedom away.



Paul wanted Galatians 5:1 to stand out like a big billboard.

What are some of the metaphors (symbols; word-pictures) used in Galatians 1:3, 4; Galatians 2:16;

and Galatians 3:13? How do they help us understand what Christ has done for us?

Paul's words "for freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1, ESV) may suggest that he has another metaphor (word-picture) in mind here. The wording of this phrase is almost the same as the wording used in the freeing of slaves by a god. Because slaves had no legal rights, a deity (god) could purchase their freedom. The slave was free, but he or she would legally belong to the god. But in truth, it was not really the god who freed the slave, because it was the slave who paid the money into the temple treasury for his or her freedom. For example, the wording found at the temple to Pythian Apollo at Delphi that dates from 201 B.C. to A.D. 100 reads, " 'For Freedom, Apollo the Pythian bought from Sosibus of Amphissa a female slave whose name is Nicaea. . . . But Nicaea has given the purchase [money] unto Apollo for freedom.' "—Adapted from Ben Witherington III, *Grace³ in Galatia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), page 340.

This wording is almost the same as Paul's wording. But there is one big difference. In Paul's metaphor, no false purchase is involved. We did not give the purchase price ourselves (1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 7:23). The price was far too high for us. We were powerless to save ourselves. But

3. grace—God's gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

Jesus stepped in and did for us what we could not do (at least not without giving up our lives). Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. In this way Jesus freed us from the penalty of sin.

Think about your own life. Do you ever think that you could save yourself? What should your answer tell you about how thankful you should be for what you have been given in Jesus?



We did not give the purchase price for our freedom. The price was too high. Only Jesus could step in and save us.

MONDAY—DECEMBER 5

WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN FREEDOM REALLY MEAN? (Romans 6:14, 18)

Paul commands believers to stand firm in freedom. An important announcement comes before this command: “Christ has set us free.” Why should Christians stand firmly in their freedom? Because Christ has already set them free. Our freedom is a result of what Christ has already done for us.

This style of making an announcement of fact followed by a warning is common in Paul’s letters (1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 10:13, 14; Colossians 2:6). For example, Paul gives several facts in Romans 6 about our condition in Christ. He says, “We know that our old self was crucified [hung on a cross] with him” (Romans 6:6, ESV). Then Paul gives the warning, “So don’t [do not] let sin rule your body, which is going to die” (Romans 6:12, NIV). This is Paul’s way of saying, “Become what you already are in Christ.” The basic teaching of the gospel does not tell us that we are not to do things in order to prove that we are God’s children. Instead, it tells us that we do what we do because we already are His children.

According to Romans 6:14, 18; Romans 8:1; Galatians 4:3, 8; Galatians 5:1; and Hebrews 2:14, 15, from what has Christ freed us?

The use of the word *freedom* to describe the Christian life stands out more in Paul’s letters than anywhere else in the New Testament. The word *freedom* shows up 28 times in Paul’s letters. However, it appears only 13 times elsewhere.

What does Paul mean by *freedom*? First, it is not just an idea. It does not mean political freedom, economic (about money) freedom, or the freedom to live any way we might please. Instead, it is a freedom that is connected with our relationship to Jesus Christ. This meaning suggests that Paul is speaking about freedom from

the slavery and judgment of a law-driven Christianity. But our freedom also includes much more. It includes freedom from sin, eternal death, and the devil.

“Outside of Jesus Christ, human life is just slavery to the law, slavery to the evil that controls the world, slavery to sin, the flesh, and the devil. God sent his Son into the world to destroy the control of these slaveholders.”—Adapted from Timothy George, *Galatians*, page 354.

What things do you feel you are a slave to in life? Memorize Galatians 5:1 and ask God to make the freedom you have in Christ a real part of your life.

TUESDAY—DECEMBER 6

THE DANGEROUS RESULTS OF LEGALISM (Galatians 5:2–12)

The way Paul begins Galatians 5:2–12 shows the importance of what he is about to say. The many translations of these verses show this importance even more: “Look” (ESV), “Listen!” (NRSV), “Mark my words!” (NIV), and “I, Paul, say to you” (ESV). Paul is clearly not fooling around. By his forceful use of the word *look*, Paul calls for his readers’ full attention and even shows his authority as an apostle (teacher). He wants the Galatians to understand that if the Gentiles (non-Jews) accept circumcision⁴ in order to be saved, then the Galatians need to understand the dangerous results of that decision.



A Christian who tries to earn salvation through works is like a runner who is hindered (stopped) from finishing his race.

What warning does Paul give in Galatians 5:2–12 about the whole question of circumcision?

The first result of trying to earn God’s favor by accepting circumcision is that it makes the person responsible for keeping the entire law. Paul’s language in verses 2 and 3 includes an interesting play on words. Paul says that Christ will not help a person who chooses to do this (*opheleseis*). Instead, he or she will be responsible (*opheiletēs*) for the law. This means that if a person wants to live according to the law, he or she cannot just pick and choose the rules to follow. It is all or nothing.

Second, the person will be “cut off” from Christ. When one makes a decision to be justified (made holy) by works, it shows that the person is not accepting God’s way of justification (forgiveness) in Christ. “You cannot have it both ways. It is not

4. circumcision—the act of cutting off the skin (called the foreskin) at the end of the penis of a man or a boy.

possible to receive Christ, which is a sign that you cannot save yourself, and at the same time, receive circumcision, which is a sign of saying that you can save yourself.” —Adapted from John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1968), page 133.

Paul’s third reason for not agreeing with circumcision is that it hinders (stops) spiritual growth. He gives the example of a runner whose race toward the finish line has been hindered by someone. In fact, the word translated as “hindered” (verse 7, ESV) was used by military (army) people to mean “breaking up a road or destroying a bridge or placing obstacles [roadblocks] in the way of an enemy, to stop him from pushing forward.”—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, page 978.

Finally, salvation through circumcision “insults” the Cross. How? The message of circumcision suggests that you can save yourself. So, it is flattering to human pride. But the message of the Cross is an “insult” to human pride because we have to admit that we are totally helpless without Christ.

Paul is very angry at the Galatians for being stubborn about circumcision. He says he wishes that the knife would slip and they would castrate⁵ themselves! These are strong words, but they show how serious Paul is about this issue.

5. castrate—to remove the testes (male sex organs).



The Cross is an insult to human pride.

WEDNESDAY—DECEMBER 7

**FREEDOM, NOT
LICENTIOUSNESS
(Galatians 5:13)**

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

What wrong use of freedom did Paul in Galatians 5:13 want to keep the Galatians from doing?

Paul knew that people probably would misunderstand his stand on the grace and the freedom that believers have in Christ (Romans 3:8; Romans 6:1, 2). The problem was not Paul’s gospel but the human desire to do as

they please. The pages of history are filled with the stories of people who could not control themselves. Who has not felt this problem in his or her own life? This is why Paul so clearly calls followers of Jesus not to let their appetite for sex and other desires of the flesh get out of control. In fact, Paul wants them to do the opposite and not to use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh but “through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13, NKJV). Anyone who serves others out of love knows that this is something that can be done only through death to self and death to the flesh. Those who cannot keep their appetites for sex and other desires of the flesh under control cannot serve others.

So, our freedom in Christ is not just a freedom from being slaves to the world. Instead, it is a call to a new kind of service. It is the responsibility to serve others out of love. It is “the opportunity to love thy neighbor without holding back. It is the possibility of creating human communities [groups] based on self-giving rather than a desire for power or position.” —Adapted from Sam K. Williams, *Galatians* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1997), page 145.

It is easy to overlook the power that the words of Galatians 5:13 had on the Galatians because we know the verse so well. But the Greek language shows that the love for this type of service does not come from human love. This would be impossible. Human love is far too limited. Paul’s use of the article (part

of speech) *the* before the word *love* in the Greek shows he is speaking of “the” love of God that we receive only through the Spirit (Romans 5:5). The real surprise is that the word translated as “serve” is the Greek word meaning “to have become a slave.” This means that our freedom is not for self but for enslavement (bonding) to one another based on God’s love.

Be honest: have you ever thought you could use the freedom you have in Christ to become involved in a little bit of sin here and there? What is so bad about that kind of thinking?

THURSDAY—DECEMBER 8

FULFILLING THE WHOLE LAW (Galatians 5:13–15)

How do you compare⁶ Paul’s negative comments about doing the whole law (Galatians 5:3) with his positive comments about fulfilling all the law (Galatians 5:14)? Compare Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:10, 12; and Galatians 5:3 with Romans 8:4; Romans 13:8; and Galatians 5:14.

Many consider (think) that the difference between Paul’s negative comments about “doing the whole law” and his positive comments about “fulfilling the whole law” are a puzzle. But they really are not. The answer is that Paul uses each wording on purpose to show an important difference between two ways of explaining

6. compare—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

Christian behavior⁷ as they are connected to the law. For example, it is important that when Paul speaks positively of Christians keeping the law, he never describes it as “doing the law.” He uses that wording only for those who are living under the law and are trying to earn God’s acceptance by “doing” what the law requires of them.

This is not to suggest that those who have found salvation in Christ do not obey. This is not true. Paul says they “fulfill” the law. He means that true Christian behavior is much more than just “doing” the law. Paul means that it “fulfills” the law. Paul uses the word *fulfill* because it goes far beyond just “doing.” This kind of obedience is rooted in Jesus (read Matthew 5:17). It is not doing without the law. It does not limit the law to just love. Instead, it provides the way for the believer to experience the full meaning of the whole law!

Where does Paul say the full meaning of the law is found? Read Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31, 33; Matthew 19:19; Romans 13:9; and James 2:8.

Paul’s wording in Galatians is rooted in Jesus’ use of Leviticus 19:18. But Jesus was not the only Jewish teacher to use Leviticus 19:18 as a summary of the whole law. For example, Rabbi Hillel lived about a generation before Jesus. He said in the Talmud (writings containing Jewish law and tradition), “Do not do what is hateful

to your neighbor. That is the whole law.”—Adapted. But Jesus’ understanding was very different (Matthew 7:12). It is more positive. And it also shows that law and love work together. Without love, the law is empty and cold. Without the law, love has no direction (purpose).

Which is easier, and why: to love others, or just to obey the Ten Commandments? Share your answers with the class.

FRIDAY—DECEMBER 9

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “True faith always works by love. When you think of the Cross, it is not to silence your soul’s sense of what its duty is. It is not to make yourself go to sleep. Instead it creates faith in Jesus, faith that will work. It makes the soul pure from the sin of selfishness. When we grasp Christ by faith, our work has just begun. Every man has sinful habits that must be overcome by serious war. Every soul is required to fight the fight of faith. If one is a follower of Christ, he cannot be dishonest, and he cannot be hardhearted, without any sympathy. He cannot be rude or filthy in his speech. He cannot be filled with self-pride. He cannot be bossy. And he cannot use sharp words of criticism or judgment against others.

“The labor of love comes from the work of faith. Bible religion means work that continues for a lifetime. ‘Let your light shine in front of others. Then they will know the good things

7. behavior—how people act in a certain situation.

you do. And they will praise your Father who is in heaven' [Matthew 5:16, NlrV]. 'So continue to work out your own salvation. Do it with fear and trembling. God is working in you. He wants your plans and your acts to be in keeping with his good purpose' [Philippians 2:12, 13, NlrV.] We are to be eager to do good works. And we need to be careful in keeping up with good works. And the True Witness [Jesus] says, 'I know thy works.'

"It is true that our busy activities [works] will not make our salvation sure. But it is also true that faith which unites [joins together] us to Christ will stir the soul to work for Jesus."—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume

6, page 1111.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ As a class, review your answers to the last question from Thursday's study. Which choice did most people find easier, and why? What important truths does your answer suggest to you about what it means to fulfill the law?
- ❷ Paul says that faith "works" through love. What does he mean?
- ❸ Examine the idea of trying to use your freedom in Christ to become involved in sin. Why is that so easy to do? When people think that way, what trap are they falling into? (Read 1 John 3:8.)