

FREEDOM, LOVE, AND FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Galatians 5:1-15
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Galatians 5:1-15

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.

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.

KEY TEXT

All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.—Galatians 5:14

GOD FREES AND REDEEMS

Unit 3: Liberating Letters

LESSONS 9-13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the key tenets of a life free in Christ.
2. Explain the connections between the law, faith, and love.
3. Plan one way to serve his or her neighbors as a practice of living a life of freedom in Christ.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Spiritual Parenting
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Fight for Freedom (Galatians 5:1)
 - A. Accomplished by Christ (v. 1a)
 - B. Abandoning the Yoke (v. 1b)
- II. Searching for Freedom (Galatians 5:2-6)
 - A. Looking to Law (vv. 2-4)
 - Fully Binding Agreements*
 - B. Looking to Love (vv. 5-6)
- III. Obstacles to Freedom (Galatians 5:7-12)
 - A. Persuasion (vv. 7-10)
 - B. Persecution (vv. 11-12)
 - Offensive!*
- IV. Paradox of Freedom (Galatians 5:13-15)
 - A. Denying the Flesh (v. 13)
 - B. Fulfilling the Law (vv. 14-15)

Conclusion

- A. They Will Know Us by Our Love
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

amanuensisuh-man-yoo-en-sis.

HagarHay-gar.

JudaizersJoo-duh-ize-ers.

Introduction

A. Spiritual Parenting

Teaching a child to seek good for others remains a difficult part of parenting. A child's behavior highlights the intrinsic selfish nature of humanity. A child may fight over toys, demand the last cookie, or balk at household chores. Parenting involves more than telling scriptural truths; it also involves modeling ethical behavior for children.

Yet even mature adults have trouble overcoming selfish practices. Adults are often no better than children regarding love for others. The churches in Galatia were wrestling with the tension of personal freedom and what was required of them as God's children. Divisions had been formed; Paul, like an attentive father, offered a new perspective on the nature of law, liberty, and love.

B. Lesson Context

Today's Scripture text marks a transition in Paul's teaching to the Galatian Christians. To this point, Paul defended the nature of his ministry (Galatians 1:9-11) and offered a new understanding on the nature of the law (3:21-22), especially for God's children (3:26-29).

Among the Galatians were individuals who required Gentile believers' adherence to Jewish religious customs and practices. Paul called out these Judaizers for compelling "Gentiles to live as do the Jews" (Galatians 2:14). Judaizers emphasized faithfulness to the old covenant—the Law of Moses—for salvation. They taught that Gentiles should show faithfulness to the works of the law to find salvation (Galatians 1:6; see Acts 15:1-5). The most visible way such faithfulness could be shown was by the act of circumcision (see Genesis 17:7-14). What resulted among the Galatians was a tension between the works of the law and expressions of faith (Galatians 3:1-14).

Prior to today's Scripture text, Paul refers to the story of Abraham's wives, Hagar and Sarah (Galatians 4:21-23; see Genesis 16:15; 17:16-21; 21:2). Paul retells the birth narratives of Isaac (by Sarah) and Ishmael (by Hagar). One might assume that Paul would connect the physical descendants of Isaac and Ishmael to that of Jews and non-Jews, respectively. However, Paul relates the spiritual descendants of Isaac to individuals in freedom from the old covenant, children of God's promises (Galatians 4:28). By contrast, Paul describes the spiritual descendants of Ishmael as those in bondage to the old covenant, never to experience the inheritance of God's children (4:30). The retelling made Paul's point clear: through faith, not law adherence, is God's blessing inherited.

I. Fight for Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:1)

A. Accomplished by Christ (v. 1a)

1a. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.

Paul's previous discussion—concerning liberty and inheritance (Galatians 4:21-31)—has come to its fulfillment. Paul reminded his audience to *stand fast therefore* in light of that *liberty*. Paul's retelling of the story of Sarah and Hagar served to show that individuals who express faith in Christ—whether they be Jew or Gentile—live in liberty (4:31; see Lesson Context).

Liberty in this regard was the result of a believer's life made new in *Christ*. But liberty is not without cost. That Christ *made* believers *free* indicated the cost: He "gave himself" for humanity's sins (Galatians 1:4; 2:20), becoming "a curse for us" as He "hanged on a tree" (3:13; see Acts 5:30-31).

B. Abandoning the Yoke (v. 1b)

1b. And be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Throughout the letter, Paul emphasized the limitations of the Law of Moses as it related to the children of God (Galatians 2:16-20; 3:10-14, 19-26). Paul's directive to avoid *again* becoming *entangled* in this regard was due to the teachings of the Judaizers (see Lesson Context).

That Paul described the law as a *yoke* highlighted the law's demands, especially those placed on Galatian Gentiles (Acts 15:10). A yoke indicated the submission of a weaker power to a stronger power (see Genesis 27:40; Leviticus 26:13; Isaiah 9:4; 1 Timothy 6:1).

God desired that His people live freely (Colossians 2:16-23), following Jesus' reminder that "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Believers are to be burdened by the needs of others (see Galatians 6:2).

What Do You Think?

What steps can believers take so they don't become entangled by sin?

Digging Deeper

How might the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18) provide an effective response to sin's entanglement?

II. Searching for Freedom (GALATIANS 5:2-6)

A. Looking to Law (vv. 2-4)

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

In at least one other letter, Paul dictated the letter's contents to an amanuensis. This individual wrote down Paul's dictated words (see Romans 16:22). It is unknown whether the letter to the Galatians was composed in the same manner (compare Galatians 6:11). If it was, we can imagine Paul taking over the pen or quill in an effort to stress the importance of the point at hand. The Galatians might have noticed a change of handwriting when they read *behold, I ... say*.

The present tense of *if ye be* indicated that some Galatians had not yet been *circumcised*, but they were considering it because of the Judaizers' influence. To that end, Paul warned that their outward practices—circumcision and uncircumcision—were considered *nothing* of value (see 1 Corinthians 7:18-19). Neither practice automatically allowed a person to experience God's promises (see Galatians 3:26-29; 4:28).

When a person depended on the works of the law—including circumcision—for their salvation, that act served to “frustrate the grace of God” (Galatians 2:21). Paul desired that a person show faith in *Christ*, not righteousness by the law. If the Galatians accepted the requirements of circumcision as mandatory for salvation, Christ’s work in freeing people from the curse of the law, sin, and death would provide them no *profit*.

While Paul warned of circumcision to the Galatians, elsewhere he asked Timothy to undergo the practice (Acts 16:1-3). Because of Timothy’s Jewish heritage, Paul wanted to remove all possible distractions to their proclamation of the gospel message. (See Galatians 2:1-3 for an example of the opposite scenario.)

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

If the Galatian believers were to be *circumcised*, then they would be required to follow the entirety of the Law of Moses. It was not as though they could pick and choose which parts of the law to observe. They would become like a *debtor*, giving their life to *the whole law*. Obedience to the law was an all-or-nothing requirement! If people disobeyed the law at one point, they were guilty of disobeying the whole law (Romans 2:25).

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

Paul reiterates a previous point: A person cannot be *justified* by both *Christ* and *the law* (see Galatians 5:2-4). Only faith can bring justification (Romans 3:28).

The phrase *fallen from grace* served as a warning: the Galatians’ acceptance as children of God was entirely dependent on God’s grace. Any attempts to find justification in the law would be equivalent to falling out of grace’s realm.

FULLY BINDING AGREEMENTS

If you’ve ever downloaded a smartphone application or computer software, you’ve seen (and perhaps ignored) the lengthy End User’s License Agreement (EULA). Developers require users to accept the agreement before using the application or software. The text of these agreements is often indecipherable for the average person. As a result, many people fail to read the whole agreement, and they bind themselves (and their device) to the agreement’s intricacies. There is no way to opt out of parts of the EULA—acceptance is all or nothing!

Paul reminded the Galatians that trusting in their adherence to the law for salvation was not a matter of preference. If they followed one aspect of the law for salvation (like circumcision), they were bound to the entirety of the law. Even though the law was from God, no one could obey it entirely.

However, God now invites people to accept the terms, conditions, and benefits of a new covenant. If you have not accepted this agreement, why not? If you have, how will you live in light of God’s eternal terms and conditions to gain the benefit?

—M. S. K.

B. Looking to Love (vv. 5-6)

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

The identifier we introduces a direct contrast to the “ye ... fallen from grace” of the previous verse. Paul included himself among those who based their *hope* on justification apart from the law. Their hope was instead based on *faith* and *the Spirit*.

The concept of justification refers to believers being declared, or counted, righteous before God as their sins are forgiven. The concept has roots in the judicial system—as a judge might declare a person righteous or condemned (see Deuteronomy 25:1). Some people argued that justification could only come about through following the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1-5).

However, Paul opposed that perspective (Acts 13:38-39; Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16). Instead, he taught that *righteousness*—for both Jew and Gentile—was attained only through faith in Christ (Romans 3:30; 5:1; compare John 14:6). By a person’s faith, God would declare them righteous (Romans 4:5; Philippians 3:8-9).

While justification is a one-time occurrence, believers have hope that the Holy Spirit will transform and sanctify the justified (Romans 12:1-2; 1 Timothy 1:7-11; Titus 3:5). This transformation begins when a believer is justified (1 Corinthians 6:11) and progresses until the end of our time on earth (see Ephesians 4:22-24; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 10:14).

What Do You Think?

How can believers wait for the fullness of God’s righteousness in the midst of daily life?

Digging Deeper

Whose support will you invite so that waiting can become a daily, proactive practice?

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

Because Paul had already expressed the failures of *circumcision*, some Galatians might have highlighted their own *uncircumcision*. Paul reminded them that *neither ... availeth any thing* regarding God’s righteousness. By highlighting the limitations of both, Paul reinforced that “there is neither Jew nor Greek ... ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (see lesson 11 on Galatians 3:28; compare Galatians 6:15).

Instead, what counted was a person’s faith in *Jesus Christ* (see Galatians 2:16; 3:11-12, 23-25). This *faith* is not passive; it is not mere believing or hoping. Instead, faith has an active component *which worketh* in the lives of those who express it.

This outward expression is demonstrated *by love*—a love rooted in God’s love (1 John 4:19). The element of love highlights faith’s superiority over the law. Love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8, 10; see Matthew 22:38-40). And as a result, it was the crux of the law (see commentary on Galatians 5:14, below).

III. Obstacles to Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:7-12)

A. Persuasion (vv. 7-10)

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

The metaphor of running a race is common in Paul’s writings (see 1 Corinthians 9:24-25; Philippians 2:16). The metaphor described the Galatians’ pursuit of Paul’s teaching (see Galatians 1:11; 2:2). They had started the race *well*; they had followed what he taught! But Judaizers, teaching a different message, obstructed the Galatians’ obedience. That Paul asked *who did hinder you* was likely a rhetorical

question; he knew the Galatians' situation. He wanted them to recognize the problem in their midst (compare 3:1).

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

Paul called the *persuasion* of the Galatian Judaizers “another gospel” (Galatians 1:6), which would “pervert the gospel of Christ” (1:7). Their message distracted other Galatians from following the gospel *that calleth* them to faith, obedience, and love.

9. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

This verse could be a part an ancient proverb familiar to many of Paul's audiences (compare 1 Corinthians 5:6). The proverb described the effect *a little leaven* would have on *the whole lump* of dough. The New Testament uses the word *leaven* figuratively elsewhere (example: Matthew 16:6-12). To Paul, the teachings of another “gospel” served as leaven among the Galatian believers. As they allowed a little of opposing persuasive teaching to take hold, specifically the alleged need for circumcision, the rest of the false teachings would take hold. The result would be division among the Galatians.

What Do You Think?

What small acts can serve as a negative influence on the lives of Christians?

Digging Deeper

What steps can Christians take to positively influence unbelievers for the advancement of God's kingdom (see Matthew 13:31-35)?

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.

Against the influence of the other teachings, Paul had *confidence* in the Galatians' mindset toward faith. The resulting positive reinforcement served to motivate the Galatians, like a parent encouraging a child. Paul hoped they would not become *otherwise minded* away from the gospel of Christ Jesus. The individual teacher (*he that troubleth*) who taught a different gospel than Paul's would face God's *judgment* and be considered cursed (Galatians 1:8-9).

B. Persecution (vv. 11-12)

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

Without further contextual clues, we are left to assume that the Judaizers claimed Paul had continued to *preach circumcision*. Perhaps their claims were based on Paul's former zeal in Judaism (Galatians 1:13-17), or his seemingly casual approach toward the issue (see 5:6).

Before his conversion, Paul had used *persecution* against followers of Christ (see Acts 9:4-5; 22:4; 26:11; 1 Corinthians 15:9; etc.). However, Paul was now the one to *suffer* the hardships he caused others to experience (compare 2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

This is not the only time when Paul wrote on *the offence of the cross*. For messianic expectations, a crucified Messiah was “a stumblingblock” (1 Corinthians 1:23). To the Judaizers, salvation without the merit of the law was equally as offensive.

OFFENSIVE!

While I pursued my graduate degree, my family and I lived in Cambridge, England. On my way home from my studies, I would walk through the Cambridge central square. Street performers known as buskers would usually fill the square. One day a certain busker played a bagpipe. The instrument's drone could be heard from many blocks away. While the performer's skill was evident, I preferred hearing bagpipes from a distance. Apparently, I was not the only person with this preference. Others complained; the bagpipes were displeasing and offensive to their ears!

In Paul's day, a cross used for crucifixion was an offensive image. It served as a reminder of the shame of a criminal's execution. Advocates of the Law of Moses could not imagine a crucified Messiah. In this sense, the cross was a blatant offense!

However, through Christ's death on a cross and His resurrection, new life by faith was possible. Have you embraced fully the new life brought through the offense of the cross?

—M. S. K.

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

The crescendo of Paul's defense hit an unexpected (and graphic) climax. Regarding the teacher(s) who had been pushing for circumcision, Paul wished *they* would *cut* themselves *off*. While this could mean Paul wished their teaching would be cut off, more likely he was referring to a literal cutting off part of one's body! Pagan sects and empires of antiquity sometimes required emasculation, or castration, of certain followers or captives (see 2 Kings 20:18; Matthew 19:12; Acts 8:27). Paul seems to say sarcastically that if the Judaizers are so impressed with circumcision, then they should go even further (see also Philipians 3:2-4).

IV. Paradox of Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:13-15)

A. Denying the Flesh (v. 13)

13a. For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty.

Paul's Galatian *brethren*—believers who expressed faith—were *called* from the yoke of the law's demands. They were henceforth to live *unto* the *liberty* that Christ had given. The Lord had worked in the Galatians, and the time had come for them to move forward in His Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:17)!

13b. Only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

But Paul extended a caution. The word *flesh* describes human nature that acts in sinful ways contrary to God's Spirit (Romans 8:1-12; Galatians 6:8; Ephesians 2:3). *Liberty* is not *an occasion* for believers to indulge their personal desires, especially sinful ones. In short, liberty does not mean license.

Christian liberty requires outward-facing action, dealing with a believer's treatment of other people. The remedy for living under the flesh is to *serve* others in *love*. As the Spirit brings liberty, a believer is required to use that liberty responsibly, concerned for the good of others (see Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7).

If Paul had desired an example of this teaching, he could have referred to the life and ministry of Jesus (see Mark 10:45; John 13:4-16, 34-35; Philipians 2:3-8). Further, Paul's own life and ministry was an application of this verse (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

What Do You Think?

How might an inaccurate understanding of freedom hinder a Christian's witness?

Digging Deeper

How, if at all, does 1 Corinthians 10:23-33 inform your answer?

B. Fulfilling the Law (vv. 14-15)

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

Paul was likely referring to *the law* of Moses and *all* that it required. The law's teachings did not culminate in customs and rituals like circumcision. Instead, the law was *fulfilled* and found complete through a person's overt concern for others (Romans 13:10).

Paul continued in the tradition of Jesus' ethical teaching, reminding believers of the importance of *love* for *neighbour* (see Matthew 22:36-40; Luke 10:25-28). Both Jesus and Paul expanded on the law's teaching, applying it broadly (see Leviticus 19:18). God is most loved when His children show love toward others (compare Romans 13:8; 1 John 4:19-21).

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

A tense conflict might lead a person to say or act in a manner that serves to *bite and devour* other people, like the actions of a predator toward a weaker animal. If believers are not filled with love (see Galatians 5:14, above), their actions may tear others down.

If the Galatians attacked one another, the result would be mutually assured destruction. They would be *consumed* by fleshly desires.

What Do You Think?

How might a Christian's response to unfair treatment give testimony to the Spirit?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to prevent conflict with a person who you find difficult to love?

Conclusion

A. They Will Know Us by Our Love

As Peter Scholtes (1938-2009) directed his South Side Chicago youth choir in the 1960s, he wanted a song that would unite the varied experiences of his church's youth group. After a day of work, Scholtes composed "They'll Know We Are Christians." The song, now made popular in numerous hymnals, reflected the sentiment of Jesus' teaching that "all men [will] know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

While believers might be free from the demands of the law, Paul taught the Galatians that such freedom requires active love for others. Showing this love is the litmus test for a believer's love for God. Self-examination regarding love is prudent for followers of Jesus. Does anything prevent or distract from your expression of love to God and others? Might your own definition of freedom stand in the way of love?

B. Prayer

Our Father, thank You for the freedom You have given us because of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us use that freedom to express neighborly love to all people that we encounter. Focus our hearts to love as You have loved us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christian liberty always seeks the good of others.