

FPFWC Christian Development



Liberating Letters

May 2022

Spring Quarter

May 21, 2022

Lesson #3 – Freedom, Love, and Faith

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Galatians 5:1-15

ICE BREAKERS-

1. How do some Christians abuse their freedom in Christ?
2. What steps can believers take so they don't become entangled by sin?

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

LESSON BACKGROUND –

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.

LESSON COMMENTARY

Paul warned the Galatians not to take on the law as a means to acceptance before God. To do so would be to forfeit freedom (**slavery**).

I. Summary—The Freedom of the Gospel (5:2–12)

5:2–4. One **benefit** Christ gives (5:2) is freedom from law (chap. 4). Apparently the legalists did not tell the Galatians that accepting **circumcision** meant **obligation** to obey **the whole Law**. In that case, of course, one has no freedom from the law. Similarly, those who have professed faith in the gospel but **are seeking to be justified by law** have implicitly shown that they consider Christ inadequate; thus, they have turned **from grace** to legalism (v. 4). **Severed** is too strong; better is “alienated” (NIV). Paul was not describing loss of salvation. Rather, he asserted that if they sought justification by law, they were not and could not be saved by grace. They would then be **fallen**, in the sense of leaving behind grace as a means of salvation, so that they would not be saved.

5:5–6. Contrary to the false approach described in vv. 2–4, Paul gave the proper approach. First, salvation does not require obedience to law; it is by the **Spirit** (cf. 3:2–3). It is not by works; it is by **faith** (cf. 2:16). Further, in Paul’s letters, first, **righteousness** is often a state of acceptance with God (e.g., Rm 3:22; 4:13; 10:5). Second, **hope** is often objective; that is, not a feeling but a thing hoped for (Ac 28:20; 2Co 3:12; Eph 1:18). Thus v. 5b can be rendered “we are waiting for the future hope that our present righteousness will grant us.” Furthermore, Christian living does not require obedience to law. Thus **circumcision** as part of conversion to Judaism does not matter. What matters is **faith**—ongoing trust in Christ—expressed through **love**. While the NT often views love as an attitude or motivation (Rm 5:7–8; 1Co 4:21; 13:3), here Paul has in mind the other side of love: godly action (1Jn 3:18). Joseph Fitzmyer, in his comments on 1Co 13:1–3, defines love as “a spontaneous inward affection of one person for another that manifests itself in an outgoing concern for the other and impels one to self-giving” (*First Corinthians*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008], 489).

5:7. Paul made an appeal as in 3:1–5. While with them, the Galatians were following the proper course. Contrary to NASB, v. 7b does not necessarily speak of successful action by the legalists. Thus v. 7 could be better rendered, “While you were running well, who cut in on you so as to keep you from obeying the truth?”

5:8–10. The word **persuasion**, found only here in the NT, is not a neutral term and is better rendered “false rhetoric.” Paul used the metaphor of **leaven** (v. 9; cf. 1Co 5:6) to refer to spreading error: If the legalist’s false teaching was left unchecked, it could permeate and harm the **whole** church. Although Paul had fears about the Galatians (3:1–5), he was sure that those who trusted the gospel would come to **adopt** his **view**. In Paul’s letters it is not uncommon to find serious concern and also confidence (cf. 2Co 7:16 vs. 11:3). Paul was unsure of the legalists’ identity (**whoever**), but sure of their **judgment** (v. 10).

5:11–12. As the legalists were **disturbing** the Galatians (v. 10), so also they were misrepresenting Paul. Apparently they asserted that, both before and after coming to Christ, Paul preached that **circumcision** was required. In fact, however, as a Christian, he preached only the **cross**. Proof of this is that he was **persecuted** by those who found the **cross** offensive (**stumbling block**).

Finally, Paul sarcastically dismissed the legalists as troublemakers. As with Jesus’ command in Mk 9:43–45, Paul’s words calling for legalists to **mutilate themselves**

were not to be fulfilled literally. Rather they were meant to stir the Galatians to cut off relations with the legalists.

V. The Practical Defense of the One True Gospel (5:13–6:10)

In this section Paul defended the gospel from the charge of lawlessness by correcting a possible misunderstanding: freedom from the law would lead to an ethical free-for-all. Paul maintained just the opposite: freedom from law (vv. 2–12) allows the Holy Spirit to provide both ethical guidance and power for godly living (vv. 13–21). This lifestyle is characterized by love and service (see 5:6). Paul said that freedom obligated them to **serve one another, through love** (v. 13). But where does *love* originate? It is produced as a fruit by the Holy Spirit; something the law could not do (5:6, 16–22; see 6:1–10 for specific expressions of love). Non-Christians cannot replicate such love because they lack the Spirit, are dominated by the sinful nature, and receive no help from the law. Instead, destructive conduct characterizes their relationships (5:17–21). Paul’s point was to underscore the futility of living by the law. The law could not save, nor could it lead one to growth in love and holiness.

A. Not Legalism Nor License but Liberty (5:13–15)

Christians have ethical obligations; as Paul said elsewhere (cf. Rm 6:1–15), freedom from law does not mean an opportunity for the “sinful nature” (so NIV; better than NASB **flesh**; cf. Rm 7:5; 8:3–8). **Flesh** refers to a conglomeration of human traits that contribute to one’s disposition to sin (cf. the comments on Rm 7:5), the old sin nature. Even the believer still has the flesh (see Rm 8:12–13; 13:14), though he is no longer “in the flesh” (Rm 7:5). That is, he is no longer in the unsaved state under the absolute domination of the flesh as an unbeliever is—just as he has a body descended from Adam though he is no longer “in Adam” (see the emphases on being “in” and “with” Christ in Rm 6:1–10). Rather than **freedom** underwriting licentiousness, properly used, it results in service to others. If one worries about respect for **Law**, one needs to hear that Christians are never said to “do” or “practice” the **Law**. Instead, when they **love**, they accomplish its real purpose (fulfilling it; cf. Rm 13:8–10), through the Spirit’s energizing work.

The comment in v. 15 reveals Paul’s assumption that the Galatians had strife. Therefore he warned them that, not only is service required, but also the lack thereof—selfishly harming others—is self-destructive.

LESSON NUGGETS – Jesus used leaven to picture sin (Matt. 16:6-12). Like yeast, false teaching is introduced quietly, it grows secretly, and soon it affects every part of your life. Freedom brings with it the responsibility to serve. Love motivates us to fulfill the law of God. (Romans 13:8-14).

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary