

February 19

Lesson 12

FREEDOM

IN CHRIST

DEVOTIONAL READING: Galatians 5:22-26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Galatians 5:1-17

GALATIANS 5:1-17

¹ It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ⁸ That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” ¹⁰ I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. ¹¹ Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. ¹² As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

KEY VERSE

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.—Galatians 5:13

LESSON AIMS

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

1. Summarize Paul’s concern regarding the status of the Galatians.
2. Contrast the life of freedom in Christ with the life of slavery to self.
3. Describe a guardrail that helps keep him or her from slipping back into the ways “of the flesh.”

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. What Does a Free Person Look Like?
- B. Lesson Background

I. Charter of Freedom ([Galatians 5:1](#))

II. Threat to Freedom ([Galatians 5:2-6](#))

- A. Fall into Debt ([vv. 2-4](#))
- B. Hope in Christ ([vv. 5, 6](#))

III. Commitment to Freedom ([Galatians 5:7-12](#))

- A. Run a Good Race ([v. 7](#))
- B. Avoid Ungodly Teaching ([vv. 8-10](#))
- C. Endure Persecution ([v. 11](#))
- D. Speak Boldly ([v. 12](#))

Spiritual Gang Culture

IV. Responsibility of Freedom ([Galatians 5:13-17](#))

- A. How to Use Liberty ([vv. 13, 14](#))
“Happy”
- B. How Not to Use Liberty ([vv. 15-17](#))

Conclusion

- A. Set Free for What?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. What Does a Free Person Look Like?

Occasionally we see newscasts of people experiencing political freedom for the first time. As totalitarian regimes fall, nations have to learn new habits. How can people live together in freedom without chaos? What does a free person look like?

Freedom in Christ raises the same questions, but with distinct answers. What keeps us from using our freedom as an excuse for the chaos of selfishness? What does a free person in Christ look like?

Today's text addresses these questions.

B. Lesson Background

Paul's letter to the Galatians addressed a struggle to come to terms with God's plan in history. The struggle involved deciding whether Gentile believers in Jesus had to adhere to the law that God gave to Israel. Some taught that Gentiles who accepted Christ had to be circumcised in order to become part of God's people; Gentiles had to receive the mark that distinguished Israel as having received God's covenant.

Paul's response is a lesson on the shape of God's work in history, which focuses on Christ's death and resurrection. Everything that came before was preparatory. God did not give Israel its law as the final expression of his purpose, but as a means of pointing to Christ ([Galatians 3:24](#)).

Part of that preparation had to do with what Israel's law did not accomplish. Even while God was giving the law to Israel, Israel was rejecting the God who gave it ([Exodus 32:1-6](#)). That pattern of rejection continued, as failure to keep God's law was the story of successive generations. This pattern demonstrated that if God's will was to be done on earth, it would take something more powerful than law.

Israel's Scriptures included promises that God would indeed do something greater: He would make a new covenant with his people, writing the law "on their hearts" ([Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)). He would replace stony hearts with new ones as his Spirit enabled them to obey ([Ezekiel 36:22-32](#)).

The cross of Christ signals the fulfillment of these promises. Now the people of God are defined not by the covenant of circumcision, but by faith in Christ who died for their sin. Because of Christ's death, God's Spirit is given to all Christians ([Acts 2:38](#)). The Galatian Christians needed to understand these truths.

I. Charter of Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:1)

1. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

This verse both summarizes the message of Galatians to this point and begins application of that message to the Galatians' lives. Christ's mission was to give humanity true *freedom*, so there can be no going back to what formerly had caused people to be in *slavery*.

This means there is to be no return to the pagan practices that some followed before becoming Christians. But it also means no going back to rely on the Mosaic law to attempt to make oneself a member of God's people. Either path is a road back to slavery. To turn back would be to thwart God's plan and lose everything for which one submits to Christ.

II. Threat to Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:2-6)

A. Fall into Debt (vv. 2-4)

2. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

Christ came as the fulfillment of what Israel's law pointed toward but could not accomplish. So for a Gentile Christian to receive circumcision would mean to turn back to the thing Christ came to fulfill! It would be to live as if Christ had accomplished nothing. Submission to circumcision threatens the very basis of the Galatians' relationship to God.

HOW TO SAY IT

Corinthians Ko-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Ezekiel Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.

Jeremiah Jair-uh-my-uh.

Mosaic Mo-zay-ik.

3. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

Circumcision signifies initiation into the people of God and intent to keep *the whole law* as God had given to his people. A *man who lets himself be circumcised* cannot claim to be part of Israel as the covenant people if he ignores the rest of the law!

Any attempt to keep the entirety of the law is, of course, a recipe for failure. Israel's history demonstrates inability to do so. To enter into that same covenant of obligation would be to repeat that same pattern of failure. God has fulfilled the promise of his law by supplying in Christ what humanity really needs: true forgiveness from sin and true power to overcome sin.

4. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Circumcision has been offered to the Galatian Christians as the supreme sign of belonging to God. But where does that leave Christ? *To be justified* is to be acceptable to God. This requires that the conditions for a sinner to be acceptable to him have been satisfied. To attempt to be *justified by the law* through a rite of that law is to say that Christ does not accomplish our justification. It is to say *no* to the *grace* Christ offers in the gospel.

How high are the stakes? Eternally high! To accept circumcision as the sign of belonging to God is to reject the eternal freedom from sin's punishment that Christ purchased by his death.

B. Hope in Christ (vv. 5, 6)

5. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

A vital feature of the new covenant is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:14). Paul has already criticized his readers with the pointed rhetorical question, "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?" (Galatians 3:2).

It's either/or, not both/and. As noted in the Conclusion to [lesson 11](#), attempts to add something to salvation in Christ actually result in subtracting. On the topic at hand, that which is subtracted is *the Spirit*. This is no small matter, since having the Spirit is a mark of a new covenant believer—a Christian (compare [2 Corinthians 1:22](#)).

The appeal of adding or substituting circumcision as that mark may be that the future righteousness in view here is thought to be under

human control. By works of the Law of Moses, a person may fantasize that he or she can achieve such righteousness on a personal timetable.

Paul squelches any such notion. It is *through the Spirit* that *the righteousness for which we hope* comes. Since such a hope comes about this way, we *wait* for it as we yield to the Spirit's timetable. Such expectant waiting can only happen in *faith*. It is when faith starts to wane that we are tempted to control the timing of things. Bad things happen when we yield to such temptation (example: [Genesis 16](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can we help one another be better at waiting "through the Spirit" for the stated hope?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding help for preteens
- Regarding help for teenagers
- Regarding help for young adults
- Regarding help for middle-age adults
- Regarding help for older adults

6. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Christ Jesus is at the center of everything God has done. So nothing else can matter as he does. Circumcision was a key part of God's unfolding plan, but circumcision is nothing compared with Christ. With the completion of his work, both Jew and Gentile come to God the same way: through faith in Christ.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, embodied the fullest expression of the love God has for humanity ([John 3:16](#)). To put faith in him, therefore, means to have faith in God's *love*. Genuine faith in Christ must therefore reflect the same love that God showed in Christ. To pay lip service to the need for faith's outworking in love is to treat God's love for us in Christ with contempt.

III. Commitment to Freedom

([GALATIANS 5:7-12](#))

A. Run a Good Race (v. 7)

7. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

Paul likes to compare Christian experiences with athletic competitions (see [1 Corinthians 9:24-27](#); [Galatians 2:2](#); [Philippians 3:14](#); [2 Timothy 4:7](#)). Runners who are focused on the finish line will have nothing to do with those who try to hinder them. In this case, those interfering oppose "*the truth* of the gospel" ([Galatians 2:5, 14](#)).

B. Avoid Ungodly Teaching (vv. 8-10)

8. That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

The opponents claim a godly purpose, but the opposite is the case. Their *persuasion* does not originate with God, the author of the gospel. To follow circumcision is to reverse his plan and to impede believers' progress to his promised future.

The word *persuasion* translates a Greek word so rare that it appears only here in the New Testament. Paul shows his brilliance in this choice because it forms a play on the Greek words translated "obeying" in [verse 7](#), above, and "I am confident" in [verse 10](#), below, in that the three words originate from the same root. Anyone who thinks Paul is a lightweight needs to think again!

9. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."

Yeast makes bread rise. When used figuratively, the imagery of yeast (leaven) is almost always in a negative or evil context (compare [Matthew 16:6](#); [1 Corinthians 5:6-8](#); contrast [Matthew 13:33](#)). Only *a little* of this substance is required to make a loaf rise properly. And as yeast affects bread, so false teaching can affect a church. The circumcision advocates appear righteous. But to adopt their teaching will be to turn one's back on God's grace in Christ. This, the deadliest of things, will be the result if false teaching about circumcision is allowed to have a foothold.

10. I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.

Paul's harsh language to this point may leave the impression that he has little confidence in the Galatian Christians. Here he corrects potential misunderstanding in that regard as he expresses trust that his readers will decide for the gospel.

But a solemn warning remains to be offered. Those who advocate circumcision are potentially turning people away from God's grace. The fact that a righteous God judges rightly puts the false teachers on notice to repent.

What Do You Think?

What steps can our church take to express confidence in God's people while warning of God's judgment, as Paul did?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When gathered as a church
 When gathered in mid-size groups
 When gathered in small groups

C. Endure Persecution (v. 11)**¹¹. Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.**

Advocates of *circumcision* apparently insist that Paul himself continues to observe Jewish practices, even that of circumcision. The events recorded in [Acts 16:3; 18:18](#); and [1 Corinthians 9:20](#) could serve as the false teachers' evidence, depending on when Galatians is written.

The contexts of those actions make clear, however, that Paul approaches the Law of Moses from the perspective of *the cross*. His continued observance of Jewish practices is always with the aim of sharing Jesus. So Paul's evangelistic technique among his fellow Israelites is to become "like a Jew" ([1 Corinthians 9:20](#)).

These are actions to extend grace, not to subvert it. The fact that Paul continues to be *persecuted* establishes that he does not insist on circumcision. Such persecution is part of the message of the cross. The idea that God should save humanity through the death of his Son is deeply offensive to so much in the human spirit. We want to believe that our lives are not so lost as to require something so extreme. The advocates of circumcision would like a different divine plan that makes salvation a matter of following the right laws. But the cross with all its *offense* offers the only way to the freedom that God has for his people.

What Do You Think?

How can we help each other appreciate freedom in Christ even while we are rejected because of the offense of the cross?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When one-on-one
 When in small or mid-size groups
 When gathered as a church
 Other

D. Speak Boldly (v. 12)**¹². As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!**

With exasperated sarcasm, Paul expresses his disdain for the advocates of circumcision. They insist that commitment to God is defined by cutting off the foreskin. Well, Paul says, if they are so intent on showing commitment by cutting, let them cut off even more than the foreskin! Like Jesus' words about plucking out eyes or cutting off hands ([Matthew 5:29, 30](#)), Paul's expression is not literal. But it does indicate his strong feelings about the situation.

SPIRITUAL GANG CULTURE

A college professor entered the world of gangs in East Los Angeles a few years ago to study that subculture. He found that children who grew up in gang-controlled areas faced powerful incentives to join gangs. The threat of harm for not joining was a common enlistment tactic. Initiation rites could include being beaten by other gang members, committing a theft, etc. A common requirement for female initiates was to give sexual service to one or more gang members.

Religious groups have been known to be like gangs in their expectations regarding initiation and loyalty. This is especially true of groups that tend toward cultish rules and practices. "True believers" are those who prove their loyalty by adhering to expectations that don't stand up to the light of Scripture or common sense. The simplicity of following Christ is lost in the excitement of establishing by personal effort one's worthiness for membership in the group.



Visual for Lesson 12. Point to this visual as you ask, “Are the boundaries separating these three categories the same for everyone? Why, or why not?”

This seems to be what was happening, or on the verge of happening, among the Galatian churches. I trust it is not happening in yours.—C. R. B.

IV. Responsibility of Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:13-17)

A. How to Use Liberty (vv. 13, 14)

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

The good news of Jesus is a comprehensive call to *freedom*. To Jews it means (or should mean) being freed from the shackles of an unbearable system ([Acts 15:10](#)). To Gentiles it means freedom from the repeated pattern of devotion to things that are not of God.

Even so, Paul warns his readers against understanding freedom in Christ to mean they have a license to live as they please. This problem is what Paul refers to as *the flesh*, by which he means “selfish indulgence,” life lived as if God were not in the picture at all. To misuse Christian freedom is to *indulge the flesh*. Freedom bought with Christ’s blood is squandered if it merely serves as twisted reasoning for a new opportunity for sin.

But there is an alternative: *serve one another humbly in love*. This is the very essence of the cross that bought our freedom: Christ in his love serving us, even though we are undeserving. To use our Christian liberty in this way is to live according to the gift God has given us. It is to let God replace our pattern of failure with the pattern of his own grace-filled, Christ-expressed love.

“HAPPY”

Roko Belic is an Academy Award-nominated movie director known best for his 2011 documentary titled *Happy*. The film depicts interviews with people in various countries to see whether they are happy. Belic found that life circumstances have little to do with happiness. Instead, one’s attitude about life and a spirit of serving others characterize the happiest people.

“Serve one another humbly in love” is Christ’s call to each of us. We do not do so in order to be saved, but because we have been saved. Lest some consider such loving service to be a form of slavery, consider the alternative: slavery to self and to this world as someone or something other than Christ is enthroned as king of one’s life. When happiness does not result, the pseudo king always has another rule to follow, a different path to self-improvement, etc. It’s a system of “trying hard, never sure.”

Faith in Christ sets us free from such a system. Any hard effort on our part comes because we are sure that Christ has already purchased our salvation. That’s what releases us from the tyranny of a “trying hard, never sure” system.—C. R. B.

¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

As Jesus had emphasized the command to love one’s neighbor ([Leviticus 19:18](#); [Matthew 19:19](#)), so do Paul ([Romans 13:9](#)) and other New Testament writers ([James 2:8](#)). All emphasize that the entire Law of Moses comes to its focus in *this one command*. God’s purpose for those who bear his image is that they should live in his world as he lives with them: in self-sacrificial, grace-filled love. All the commandments he gives are specific expressions of the honest, faithful, forgiving love that God himself demonstrates. This is how the gospel calls all people to the freedom that leads to the fulfillment of God’s will.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to expand the ways in which we use our freedom in Christ to serve others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In church programming
- In personal sacrifice
- Other

B. How Not to Use Liberty (vv. 15-17)

¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

The circumcision controversy seems to be a point of bitter division in the Galatian churches. The time has come for all to remember the true message of Jesus, with the cross as its focus. God’s love means God’s people must love one another, even when they have been unlovely. To fail to live such love can mean the destruction of a church, to the ruin of God’s purpose.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

If the story of humanity is a story of failing to fulfill God’s purpose, how can we possibly change that path? God does not leave us alone in our freedom. Through Christ we receive God’s Holy Spirit, who empowers us to overcome the old mind-set and habits that work against the life for which God has freed us. Our objective is now to live moment by moment by the Spirit’s power.

To do so is the opposite of the old life, which is rooted in self-centeredness. *The desires of the flesh* refer not just to physical desires but to all desires that put self on the throne. God’s Holy Spirit empowers us to enthrone Christ instead. As we *walk by the Spirit*, we do not desire to return to the old, self-centered life.

¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

The two ways of life are always *in conflict with each other* as they battle for control over us. Our frustrations with ourselves as Christ’s followers stem from this conflict. When the old life seems to be winning, we become distrustful of ourselves as free people.

The answer to our problem is always in the gospel; the Holy Spirit is stronger than sinful selfishness. Trusting the sufficiency of Christ and the power of the Spirit, we can overcome the old patterns and learn the true life of freedom.

What Do You Think?

How can our church help members recognize when they are hindering the Holy Spirit’s battle against “the flesh”?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding challenges various age groups are likely to face
- Regarding gender-targeted challenges

Regarding Satan's tactics in general

Other

Conclusion

A. Set Free for What?

If you were free to become anything that you chose to be, what would you choose? To what use would you put such radical freedom?

We should all consider how our honest answer to such a question compares with what we confess as Christians. If we truly believe that Christ's cross saves us from the ruin of our lives, do we let the cross define what should become the purpose of our lives? For what has Christ set us free?

B. Prayer

God, we thank you for the freedom granted us in Christ! By the power of your Spirit, we ask that you enable us to use it in gratitude and praise to the one who gave it. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Ours is not just freedom *from*. It is also freedom *to*.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Before this session, gather 5-10 instrumental renditions of patriotic tunes. These will be used in a game of Name That Tune. You can obtain such compositions inexpensively from reputable music-download websites.

To begin the session, ask two members to volunteer to compete in this game. Proceed as follows:

1. The first contestant says, "I can name that tune in [a certain number of] seconds."
2. The second contestant has the chance to "underbid" the first by pledging to name the tune in fewer seconds.
3. Bidding continues until one player decides not to underbid and challenges, "Name that tune!"
4. You will then play the first song, carefully watching the counter on your player (or the second hand on a watch) to play the tune for exactly the amount of seconds bid.

A player gets a point for naming the tune, or the opponent gets the point if the player is unable to do so. Play as many rounds as time permits.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "President or Poet?" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work on it individually.

After either activity, lead into Bible study saying, "A lot of ideas are bound up in the word *freedom*. Paul helped the Galatian Christians understand the importance of being truly free."

Into the Word

Say, "Sometimes it is helpful to try to summarize a portion of Scripture in just a few words." Before class, cut some ordinary sheets of copy paper in thirds vertically to make bumper sticker-size strips. Have pencils, pens, and markers available.

Divide the class into four groups. Give each group a section of the Bible text as outlined in the commentary. Groups are to read their section of the text and create one or more bumper stickers with a slogan that summarizes that section. The verse divisions and sample Socratic slogans follow:

Group 1—Charter of Freedom ([Galatians 5:1](#))

Get Free! Stay Free! Live Free!

Group 2—Threat to Freedom ([Galatians 5:2-6](#))

Jesus did what we cannot.

Group 3—Commitment to Freedom ([Galatians 5:7-12](#))

I want to be a slave to religious ritual. (Said no one ever!)

Group 4—Responsibility of Freedom ([Galatians 5:13-17](#))

Freedom—It's about how you use it.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Prepositional Propositions” activity from the reproducible page. Assign each student a partner. Have students work on the activity individually and then talk about their responses with their partners.

Into Life

Give each learner a strip of paper resembling a highway guardrail. (Simple parallel lines on a strip with a label “guardrail” will do.) Say, “Driving along life’s highway can be hazardous. Just over the side ... way down below ... is the Valley of the Way of the Flesh. The guardrail is in place to keep us from slipping off into the abyss. What is your ‘guardrail’? What is it that keeps you from slipping off the road to Heaven?”

Allow time for learners to respond freely, suggesting that each listen and write some entries from the oral list onto their paper guardrails. Encourage students to tape their guardrails in a place where temptations to fleshly living abound (examples: on the television set or on the inside door of the car or near the handle of the refrigerator).