

Galatians:
Commentary
Galatians 5:1-15: The Privileges of Freedom

In these final two chapters, Paul presents the ethics that result from a life of grace through faith in Jesus.

1 For freedom Christ has set us free;

What a tremendous claim Paul has made: that Jesus has set us free from slavery so that we would be free! This is a contra-assertion to the false claim that Jesus offers a hope of salvation that can only be attained by a different self-enslavement to an alternate taskmaster of religiosity or traditionalism. In this regard, in Christ a person can fully realize the everlasting truth of being free from sin, free from judgment, free from death, free from God's wrath.

stand firm therefore,

Out of the truth of the affirmation of freedom, Paul voices the imperative to "stand firm." This command means "exist...live...be...remain." It speaks to a vigilant determination to experience and express the reality of spiritual freedom that is rooted in the effective work of Jesus in delivering you from spiritual bondage and eternal separation.

and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

"Standing" is not a simple passivity of existing in the basking goodness of freedom. It also requires the ongoing determination to both resist and oppose the forces that seek to again enslave the believer. These forces are carnal (self), worldly, and spiritual, and are constantly at war against the Spirit-filled, Spirit-led person resolute in freedom through Jesus.

Both receiving freedom and actively opposing bondage are faith experiences. Neither is possible in the flesh.

2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

Paul is calling for the Galatians to pay attention. His following statement rests upon his apostolic identity. He is appealing to his own well-established authority that they would take what he is about to share and weigh it heavily. He had spoken indirectly earlier about these matters, here, though, he was addressing the matter forthrightly. He was writing to the Galatians who had not yet been circumcised, but were being persuaded by the Judaizers' flawed reasoning. Their willingness to accept and participate in the action of circumcision is not a mere "hedging the bets" by embracing all options, but it would mean overtly rejecting the grace and accepting the "yoke of slavery" that accompanies the action.

3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

Not only does participation alienate one from the freedom available in Jesus, but it places upon the circumcised the assumption of responsibility for the totality of all the legal implications and ramifications from doing so. This declaration is articulated with his strong "testimony" that the matter for the Galatians is more about a full disclosure on the requirements of the law, rather than it being about the full requirements of the gospel (as was wrongly suggested by the Pharisees by their demand for circumcision).

4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

There is no "middle ground," no "fence upon which to straddle" for the Galatians who were considering these matters. To modernize a comparison first expressed by Luther, it doesn't matter which part of a plane you are on when it crashes irrecoverably into a mountainside. If you fall away from grace, you perish utterly. This does not presuppose the argument that a believer can abandon the grace that saves. Rather, he is writing to a church that was established in grace and was considering abandoning that foundation in favor of false doctrines that would irrevocably imperil countless people to come who would be falsely influenced by the destructive doctrines of legalism.

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

Paul makes a transition here from the negative to the positive. The tone until now has been stern, even ominous. However, he fluidly transitions to the counter position that, unlike the law, the Spirit of God offers the hope of righteousness. Note that this "hope" is not a vain aspiration, but a reliable expectation based upon the good, faithful, holy nature of God Himself. The object of this expectation is righteousness, which Paul had earlier explained was a gift of grace bestowed on God's initiative to His children throughout history, and not a wage paid for efforts exerted.

Righteousness, or right standing with God, is the expectation of the believer. This expectation elicits a joyful anticipation, an eagerness. This eagerness is an expression of faith, which is only possible as a gift from God's Spirit. No human effort can produce it. No human initiative can manufacture it.

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

This pivotal statement summarizes the essence of the Christian faith expressed. No external consideration bears significance in Jesus. The summation of the Christian experience is this: faith functioning through love. It is vital to note that love (for God or for others) does not have the power of justification. You are justified by faith, which is a gift of grace. This true faith is expressed through love.

7 You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

In verses 1-4, Paul explained the potential perils. In verses 5-6, he explained the great reality of promise through faith. In verses 7-12, Paul reports the perilous position in which the Galatians find themselves. He begins by commending them for their initial foray into these spiritual matters by telling them they had started well.

Paul commonly used analogies to running to communicate spiritual truth. It has been argued that running was the "football" of biblical times. It was a popular competitive sport and a common frame of reference to the "every man." Paul's language here is that they had begun the marathon of the faith life in an admirable fashion. However, "who hindered you" evokes the idea of them being inappropriately "cut in" on, resulting in placing burdens upon them which was making grace harder to embrace.

As Paul asks "who?" he was not asking for names and details. He is asking a more general question that is more about challenging the hinderers stature than seeking their true identities.

8 This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

In fact, Paul makes it clear that those who would dare to hinder the true spiritual progression of a believer is certainly not Jesus, or even anyone who would truly follow Jesus. This is a reminder

both of the message of Jesus, and announcement of the tactics of those who oppose him.

9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

This verse explains how the Judaizers' tactics took effect, analogous to a small amount of leaven being introduced into the dough. Paul's (and the Gospel's) opponents were shrewd. They did not attempt to "overthrow" or to completely rebut the Gospel; rather, they simply tried to add one burden or obligation to it. However, Paul rightly points out that to do so corrupts the entirety of the Gospel. Like leaven which causes the bread to "puff up," so too does this one added burden result in a person "puffing up" with a sense that they contributed to their own right standing before God by the act that they had undertaken.

10 I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view,

Paul again returns to his positive view toward the Galatians, one filled with an expectant hope that they will be convicted of God's truth. Notice that Paul's confidence is not rooted in their ability to discern. If that had been the case, this very letter would likely have been unnecessary. No, Paul's confidence is "in the Lord." The bedrock of Paul's confidence is in the stalwart reliability of God to complete what He has started. He is confident in the Lord that the Galatians will not be further deceived by the Judaizers.

and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

Earlier in chapter 2, Paul had issued an anathema on anyone who would preach an alternate gospel (himself included). Generally, Paul referred to the Judaizers as a plurality. Here, though, Paul, offers a nonspecifically singular warning toward "the one who is troubling you." Paul is plainly assessing the unknown (to us at least) perpetrator's actions as troubling. They are causing trouble - division, confusion, consternation, and potentially desertion - among the Galatians. To the one and to those who would undertake such nefarious actions - even if they be sincerely minded in their endeavors to preserve their mistaken understanding of the law - an unavoidable penalty awaits. It cannot be assumed that a "special penalty" beyond eternal separation from God awaits them, for this penalty awaiting all who oppose Jesus is sufficiently devastating.

11 But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

Part of the controversy between Paul and the Judaizers apparently included a slanderous accusation against Paul that he himself was an advocate for circumcision. Not only is this untrue (cf. [1 Cor. 7:18-19](#)), but he actually consistently explained circumcision to be a cultural matter rather than a theological necessity. Here, Paul simply asks rhetorically that if what the Judaizers were asserting were true, why then did he continue to experience persecution? That he was being persecuted is the only response necessary to demonstrate that he indeed was preaching a "different gospel" than the false one they were promoting.

In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

If Paul had indeed been an advocate for circumcision as a necessity for righteousness, the effect of such would be the rendering useless of the cross of Jesus. To the Judaizers, to all those who were wanting the glory of God and the presentation of Messiah to unfold in a power-packed, miraculous manner, the cross is indeed an offensive scandal. God chose to use the most humiliating manner possible to show the depth of man's depravity, that he would go to furthest extent possible to kill his Creator. And in the cross...this ugly, violent cross...God demonstrated the heights of His love for man, that He would in fact allow Himself to be killed by His creation, and in so doing that He Himself would bear the consequence for their rebellion against Him, and that He would overcome all this so that rebellious man may be redeemed back in to everlasting relationship with Him in Jesus.

If circumcision were a viable means of righteousness, the cross is not needed. Its offensiveness is removed and should be disregarded wholly.

12 I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

This verse has been labeled the most crude or crass of all of Paul's writings. It should not be construed that Paul was advocating violence against the proponents of the false gospel. Avoiding the temptation to interpret this verse in light of contemporary psychology and instead focusing solely on a scriptural interpretation, Paul hearkens back both earlier to Galatians ([Gal. 4:8-9](#)), but also to the Old Testament ([Deut. 23:1](#)). Paul is ever mindful that adding to the gospel leads others to damnation. Here, with a base vernacular, Paul imprecates an ironic vindictive against those who advocate the circumcision of others. Instead of considering this as a bloodlust on one extreme, or trying to passively "explain it away" with softened analysis at the other extreme, it is perhaps best viewed in consideration with the plea of the martyred saints in heaven at the end times who ask, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ([Rev. 6:10](#)).

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers.

Paul simply reminds the Galatians - his kindred by faith - that they were freed for freedom.

Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh,

Here, for the first time, Paul explicitly addresses the possibility that this freedom can be distorted and misused. The freedom made available through Christ makes possible that a person can cast off all restraint and indulge in all manners of lustful expressions.

but through love serve one another.

Godly love is serving and sacrificial. Carnal love is selfish and indulgent. Because the Christian is freed for freedom, the right expression of that freedom is love that serves others. This illuminates the differences between what enslaves a person, versus who has freed the person.

14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This is the most positive, simple expression of the law. The pinnacle aspiration of the law is to love others as we love ourselves...graciously, excessively, continually forgiving, perpetually expecting the best, keeping no record of wrong, believing all things in others the same way you do yourself, hoping all things, and expecting all things. None of this simplicity compromises the impossibility of the law that Paul expresses elsewhere in the Scriptures. We strive in vain to love others in this manner. Even so, we are not to abandon this ideal, particularly for the license of vain indulgence.

15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

The debate introduced by the Judaizers has been contentious, hence this imagery of intra-congregational biting and devouring. The consequential effect of this disunity regarding the gospel is contradictory to the ideal of selfless love to which Paul exhorts the Galatians. He sternly warns them to continue to entertain the dangerous, destructive doctrine of self-justification will consume this community of faith.

Galatians: The Gospel for Everyday Life
Galatians 5:1-15 - *The Privilege of Freedom*
Small Group Member Guide

Start the conversation - Cutting to the Chase

Ask

What is a pet peeve of yours?

Consider the person who cuts in line. Why do you think this is so frustrating? What do you think the person who cuts in line is thinking?

Freedom (Galatians 5:1)

What does it mean to you that "For freedom you have been freed?"

What are some things that you are able to do now "in freedom" that you were not able to do before?

What Matters Most (Galatians 5:2-6)

Looking at this passage, what stands out to you?

What do you see in here as an explanation about why circumcision was such an obstacle to spiritual freedom?

What are some ways that we see people today "hedging their bets" by "trying to be good Christians" or "doing the right thing?" and denying grace in the process?

Look closely at verse 6. What does that mean to you today that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters?

What does it mean to you that "the only thing that matters is faith expressed through love?" What does that look like in your life?

A Warning for Spiritual Pattyrollers (Read Galatians 5:7-12)

How were the Judaizers like the Pattyrollers?

What do modern-day spiritual pattyrollers look like?

What do you make of Paul's stern words against these pattyrollers?

Fight for Freedom (Read Galatians 5:13-15)

What are ways that you (or that you have seen) the licentious extreme?

What does Paul say is the correct use of freedom, instead of licentiousness?

What does it mean, then, in the context of serving, to "love others as we love ourselves?"

The following pages
are for small group leaders.

Galatians: The Gospel for Everyday Life

Galatians 5:1-15 - The Privilege of Freedom

Small Group Leader Guide

Prepare: Things to do before your small group gets together

- **Reflect** upon the freedoms you enjoy daily, but often take for granted: the freedom to speak, the freedom of the press, your freedom of religion, and others. **Thank God** for your freedoms, for placing you in this country and in this time in history. **Praise** Him for the spiritual freedom you have to live in grace.
- **Review** Galatians 5:1-15 to review the content of the biblical focus. **Invite** God to speak to you with a fresh application of His timeless truth. **Ask** God to open your eyes to see opportunity to share His love and truth with others, that you might also live by faith. **Submit** your heart to God's conviction, that you may be exhorted to experience anew the timely activity of God's Holy Spirit in your life.
- **Read** the provided [commentary on Galatians](#) 5:1-15. **Preview** this material and engage with God's Spirit as He guides your study.
- **Pray** for your small group members by name, asking God to reveal a meaningful appreciation for their part in the family of God. **Seek** God's wisdom in leading your small group to apply God's word to their lives. **Commit** yourself to the Lord, that you would live what you teach.

To The Point - What to impart to your small group

Key Verse: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Galatians 5:6, ESV)

Objectives: Through your time exploring this passage, your small group members will:

Explore spiritual freedom.

Discuss the opposition to spiritual freedom and the ways spiritual freedom is attacked.

Identify opportunities to express spiritual freedom through love and not license.

Leader Guide Key:

Blue - hyperlinks to other resources

Red - Reading prompts

Green - Leader headers and *sample responses to questions*

Encounter: A suggested plan for your small group experience

Start the conversation - Cutting to the Chase

Say

It's been said that a pet peeve is a domesticated annoyance, meaning that it becomes something frustrating that that you're forced to live with, like a dog that constantly pees on the floor or a cat that uses everything as a personal scratching post. The term actually originated around the term "peeve," which means "a mild irritation," and pet has nothing to do with an animal, but is actually a shortened form of "petty."

Ask

What is a pet peeve of yours?

Say

For many people, a pet peeve is when somebody else cuts in front of them in line, like at the grocery store, a restaurant or club, or for buying tickets.

Ask

Why do you think this is so frustrating? What do you think the person who cuts in line is thinking?

Say

Whatever the motive, the person who cuts in line takes a privilege at the expense of others. Perhaps he feels he is free to do this, while everybody else is "playing by the rules." Maybe she feels like the rules don't apply to her, even if they do to the rest of us. In our time together, we aren't going to focus on pet peeves. Instead, we're going to talk about freedom. What our true freedom is, and what it isn't. We may discover that some of the things we think are really important are really just domesticated annoyances, minor irritations. And we're going to explore how through God's grace we get to cut in line in all manners of speaking, for some perhaps surprising opportunities.

Open in prayer for your time together.

Freedom (Galatians 5:1)

Ask

What does it mean to you that "For freedom you have been freed?"

While there are many possible answers, it is important to understand, in a general sense, that those who have been made free in Christ were made to be free in Christ. This means that Christ paid the ransom of their debt to God for their rebellion against Him, so they would not have to live under the constant enslavement of their sin. In Christ alone can a person be who they were truly capable of being. Apart from Jesus, a person is hopelessly shackled to the law that perpetually shows them they are in bondage to sin.

What are some things that you are able to do now "in freedom" that you were not able to do before?

This may be a difficult question for people to answer, because many people remain satisfied to live lives that are remarkably similar to their pre-Christian experience, even after coming to faith in Christ. Differences to highlight may include:

- *I now come to church because I want to, not because I feel like I have to.*
- *I now worship or sing because the songs have personal meaning to me and I sing them to God personally, instead of being quiet because I'm not a great singer, or singing along even though I have no connection with the words.*
- *I pray more often because it means I'm spending more time with my Father in heaven, rather than just "doing my prayer duty," or checking in when I need something.*
- *I read my Bible frequently because I discover more about myself, others, and God, instead of only opening it when the Pastor tells me to do so.*
- *I participate in small group because it is a joy to be in community with others who are exploring this spiritual freedom, rather than remaining isolated or being satisfied with getting my "religion fill up" with a weekly church service.*
- *I find opportunities to serve because it's been incredible to see God use me to bless others or bring freedom to others, rather than just being satisfied to take what he's*

given to me and do little with it.

What Matters Most (Galatians 5:2-6)

Say

If we have been freed for freedom, then it seems right that we keep freedom a priority.

Ask

Looking at this passage, what stands out to you?

Allow for group members to share their observations.

What do you see in here as an explanation about why circumcision was such an obstacle to spiritual freedom?

For a person to choose to be circumcised after becoming a follower of Jesus, they are denying the very freedom that has been provided to them through God's grace.

What are some ways that we see people today "hedging their bets" by "trying to be good Christians" or "doing the right thing?" and denying grace in the process?

While there are countless answers to this question, the points to emphasize are that people are inclined to "hedge bets" with a "just in case" mindset, thinking, "I know Jesus saved me, but I better do this (go to church, give an offering, not watching that R-rated movie, not laughing at that risqué joke) just in case there's still something to this law thing." In essence, it's an attempt to do the right things, but having the wrong motive.

Look closely at verse 6. What does that mean to you today that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters?

It means there's many "external" things that really don't matter. We put a lot of importance on a lot of really unimportant stuff.

What does it mean to you that "the only thing that matters is faith expressed through love?" What does that look like in your life?

Faith is meant to be expressed! Faith that is expressed only by ritual or tradition just doesn't matter to God. He wants your faith to be expressed through love! He wants you to "do the right things" because He loves you and He has freed you to be able to do them! You do these things not because you have to, but because now you are finally able to in freedom rather than obligation! Expressing your faith through loving others is vital, too (to be further explored in the remainder of this gathering).

A Warning for Spiritual Pattyrollers (Read Galatians 5:7-12)

Say

Pattyrollers were patrols that, in the time of slavery in the US, organized to exact discipline and hunt down fugitive slaves.

Ask

How were the Judaizers like the Pattyrollers?

The Judaizers organized around the Galatians and disciplined them for not being circumcised. They were attempting to re-enslave them to the bondage of the law.

What do modern-day spiritual pattyrollers look like?

They have a critical spirit about virtually every aspect of church life, or even the life of other believers. They have an opinion on what others should be doing or not doing. They hold themselves as an ideal (except where they aren't and they don't talk about that), and measure

others condescendingly according to this standard.

What do you make of Paul's stern words against these pattyrollers?

Paul isn't just "wishing bad things" against them. He's issuing an anathema against their destructive dogmas and enslaving practices. He's fighting for freedom because he understands that freedom - particularly spiritual freedom - is constantly under attack by those who would seek to enslave the free. It must be defended for it to advance.

Fight for Freedom (Read Galatians 5:13-15)

Say

Christians have been called to fight against these spiritual pattyrollers. However, for the first time in Galatians, Paul acknowledges the danger is to go to the other extreme, which is licentiousness, or indulgence.

Ask

What are ways that you (or that you have seen) the licentious extreme?

Answers will vary. The idea that should be communicated is the willingness or practice of taking the freedom that God has given and using it for behaving in ungodly ways as though it does not matter because the Christian is free. The indulgent Christian uses the freedom Jesus bought with the cost of His life as their license to dishonor his holiness.

What does Paul say is the correct use of freedom, instead of licentiousness?

We are to serve others, out of a love motive and as a love expression.

What does it mean, then, in the context of serving, to "love others as we love ourselves?"

We tend to serve ourselves lavishly because we love ourselves. We nourish ourselves, we attend to ourselves. We provide for ourselves. We develop ourselves personally, relationally, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. We are supposed to love others in these ways as much as we love ourselves. We are to serve others in these ways as an expression of love....that we feed, clothe, minister to others. That we equip them to know God. That we share Jesus with them. That we teach them God's truth. That we realte with them and disciple them and commission them to extend the gospel with the world. That we partner together and serve the underserved, the oppressed, the widows and orphans. That we show hospitality and inclusion and attend to others as we do ourselves because we love them as we have been loved.

Say

This means something different for each one of us. Let us agree that it does mean something. We cannot be satisfied with simply nodding our heads in agreement that this is true, but not personally responding to God's command that we love others as we love ourselves and we should serve others out of this love. A great tool for escaping licentiousness is to take your focus off of yourself but to focus on others and express God's love for them through serving them.

Let's close in prayer:

Invite the group to pray for one another. Pray over any needs or issues that were shared in your time together. Pray over the content discussed in your small group, highlighting the aspects that God's Spirit revealed to your group as important. Confirm your plans for your next gathering!