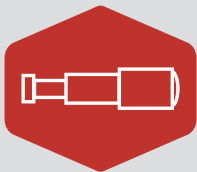




Lesson 11: Learning to Stay Free in Christ

Main Idea: Paul makes the case that freedom leaves people with two options: continue to walk in freedom or submit again to slavery. In this lesson, you will learn that Christian liberty is not a license to keep on sinning.

Scripture: Galatians 5:1-13



The Author's Lens (Spyglass)

What did the Scripture mean to the original author and audience? As you explore information on the author, content, culture, history, land, and language of the Bible, you will gain a better understanding of the intended message of God's Word.

One of the biggest themes in Paul's letter to the Galatians is freedom, which is the focus of this section (5:1-13). Paul opens this section (verse 1) by reminding the Galatians that Jesus is the greatest liberator, setting people free for the sake of staying free. God brought great freedom to the pagan people in Galatia who were shackled by idolatry and living in bondage to evil powers. Christ set them free from the curse of the Law and brought them into redemption.

In verse one, Paul admonishes the Galatians to “stand firm” against the Judaizers. New Testament scholar Craig S. Keener says, “The command *stand firm* is appropriate for a people delivered from slavery; Moses exhorted the Israelites, just delivered by God from slavery in Egypt, to ‘stand firm’ because God would protect them from their pursuers, who wanted to re-enslave them.”¹

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary*, New Cambridge Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 440-441.

Paul writes at the end of verse 1, “Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Some Judaizers came to the church in Galatia and said that Jesus was not enough: that if the Galatians really wanted to be connected with Christ, they needed to be yoked to the law. What this really meant is that their whole lives would become controlled by the law of Moses.

The symbolism of a yoke is powerful. A yoke is a beam of wood that connects two oxen that enables them to pull a load for their master. In Leviticus 26:13, God uses breaking a yoke to declare he had freed the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Jesus uses the yoke image in Matthew 11:28–29 when he speaks to people who under the burden of religion. He says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you . . . and you will find rest for your souls.” In Acts 15:10, Peter refers to the attempt to keep all the rules of the law as an unbearable yoke. Paul now uses this powerful image to remind the Galatians that Jesus had set them free, but they had become entangled again by a yoke of bondage.

In verses 2–4, we find three principles about the Galatians’ spiritual freedom—and by extension, our own. First, the Galatians were free from a works-based salvation (verse 2). Circumcision was the Judaizers’ way for the Galatians to become right with God—a work that made Christ “of no advantage” to the Galatians. Acts 15:1 records the Judaizers’ argument that unless believers were circumcised and kept the Law, they could not be saved. The Judaizers taught that what Jesus did on the Cross was not enough.

As to the second principle, the Galatians were free from trying to meet impossible standards (Galatians 5:3). The Judaizers had no problem with the idea that Jesus brought salvation and redemption, but they taught that since Jesus did all of that, the Galatian God-fearers were obligated to pay Him back by Law-keeping. Jewish historian and professor Mark D. Nanos observes,

Paul’s own comment in Galatians 5:3 bears witness to the concern for full Torah observance that obtains for Jewish people and extends to those who complete . . . conversion. Gentiles who become [converts] to Judaism and take on halachic (legal) Jewish identity ‘will then be obliged to observe the whole Law.’²

The third principle of the Galatians’ Christ-won freedom is that they are free from self-sufficiency (vs. 4). Grace and works do not mix in terms of right-standing with God. Paul’s message to the Galatians was that they would either trust in their own work and effort to do good, or they would trust in the work of the Cross on their behalf. The Judaizers wanted the Christians in Galatia to depend on both. Paul argues that their rationale will not work. By faith, believers become the righteousness of God in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:21).

² Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 142, 253.

In verse 6, Paul again writes about circumcision in the context of religious performance. Paul argues that good religious performance does not make a person more right with God; neither does bad religious performance cast a person away from God. It is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision; neither good works nor bad. What makes a person right with God is faith in Jesus and trusting in the love God demonstrated on the Cross where Jesus died as the substitute for humanity.

In verse 7, Paul focuses on what happens when someone tries to add a ritual to belief in Christ for salvation. If the Galatians tried to add circumcision to their salvation experience, they would be hindered. Paul writes to the Galatians that these Judaizers have hindered them, despite their persuasiveness (verse 8).

In verse 9, Paul uses another analogy: leaven. Leaven is used throughout the Scriptures to represent various things including sin, hypocrisy (as in the leaven of the Pharisees), compromise, and even the Kingdom of God. Whether leaven is good or bad, the idea is that it spreads. Paul writes that legalism is deadly and, like leaven, would spread. He wants the Galatians to realize there is coming a day of accountability and judgment for the Judaizers if they take people away from true grace (verse 10).

The Judaizers told the Galatians that Paul had watered down the gospel for them, because in other places he had preached circumcision (verse 11). Paul denies this. Although Paul had wanted Timothy to be circumcised, it was not for salvation but so Timothy could enter the synagogues to do ministry.

Paul writes something outrageous in verse 12: “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!” In addition to its shock factor, this exclamation has significant cultural context. Bible commentator and former seminary president Maxie Dunnam shares some eye-opening insight:

Galatia was near Phrygia where people worshiped [the goddess] Cybele. The priests and sometimes other devout worshipers, in frenzied devotion, mutilated themselves by castration. Cybele priests were eunuchs. The Galatians who knew about these priests could not miss his inference. If salvation depended on the merit of a physical operation, circumcision, why not go all the way and castrate yourselves like the heathen priests?³

In essence, Paul was saying, “If a little cut is good, then just whack the whole thing off because that would be really good.” Perhaps Paul makes this exaggerated statement to first show the Judaizers how ridiculous they are

³ Maxie D. Dunnam, *Galatians / Ephesians / Philippians / Colossians / Philemon*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, The Preacher’s Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1982), 31:102.

and, second, to show that this is an extremely serious matter.

Grace sets free but legalism hinders. When Paul says that grace sets people free *from* certain things, he recognizes that it also sets people free *to* certain things. In verse 13, Paul concludes this section by telling the Galatians that grace set them free to do three things. First, grace set them free to walk in the Spirit. It was the Spirit of God who called the Galatians to walk in true freedom from works-based salvation, from impossible standards, and from self-sufficiency. The way to walk in the Spirit is to focus on Jesus.

Second, grace set them free to walk in love. If freedom is interpreted merely as the removal of restraint, sin will seize the opportunity and use the weakness of human nature to attack the Spirit. Paul emphasizes that Christian freedom accepts a willing servitude. A perfect example of this is the classic story of a young man who gets married. Before he got married, he was free—free to play sports or video games as long as he wanted, spend his money how he liked, and dress however he pleased. But when he met his wife and fell in love with her, he came to share her lifestyle and did not want to be free to do his own thing anymore. Love caused that. Love limits freedom. The Galatians needed to know that when they loved God and the people He loved, their freedom to do whatever they wanted was restricted.

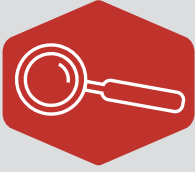
Lastly, Paul tells the Galatians that grace set them free to serve others. When people come to Christ, their motives change. Becoming a Christian means being set on a lifelong trajectory of becoming more like Jesus. For believers, everything, and especially why they do what they do, changes to increasingly reflect the One who gave everything for the world to know Him. Freeing grace means that we no longer serve God and others out of obligation but out of love for and through Him.



My Lens (Eyeglasses)

What does this Scripture say to you? Through studying the biblical explanations and principles in the text and bullet points below, you will better understand what God's Word is saying to you today.

- The freedom we have in Christ Jesus is wonderful and life-altering (v. 1).
- Reconciliation is an aspect of Christian freedom (v. 1).
- Emancipation from one spiritual structure is possible because participation in another spiritual structure is available through Christ (vv. 2-6).
- Be careful not to move out of the realm of participating in His death and resurrection as the source of life and hope (v. 4).
- The hope of righteousness assures us of God's pardon and the full realization of the perfection He promised (v. 5).
- No amount of religious activity counts in the economy of God. God's economy is all grace (v. 6).
- Faith expresses itself in love (v. 6).
- Christ, and He alone, has the power to keep you (vv. 7-10).
- Beware of destroying one another (v. 11).
- Freedom requires discipline (v. 13).



The Holy Spirit Lens (Magnifying Glass)

How can the Scripture apply to your life? By listening to the Holy Spirit's leading as you answer this series of questions, you can gain useful insights that will help you apply the truth of God's Word to your daily life.

Write down your answer to the following question here or in your journal:

- Circle and write down any recurring words in this passage.

- Who appears in this passage?

- Where is this passage taking place?

- When is this passage occurring?

- Why is this passage important?

- What is happening in this passage?

- How does this passage apply to my life?



- Have you ever been caught in the trap of salvation by works, impossible standards, or self-sufficiency? What was your experience?

- Have you ever been part of legalistic faith community? Without naming names, what was your experience?

- How are you tempted to fall into legalism? How can you best resist that temptation?

- How has God's grace changed your perspective about personal holiness and ministry service?



Using My *Fire Bible*®

Read the study notes for the following verses and articles in the *Fire Bible* and answer the accompanying questions.

- **Galatians 5:4** What does “fall away from grace” mean?

- **Galatians 5:6** How did Paul define saving faith? What is not saving faith?

- **Galatians 5:7** What two forms does false teaching take in the church? Describe in your own words the three New Testament thoughts for a complete Christian.

- **Galatians 5:13** See the *Fire Bible* note on 2 Corinthians 3:17. Describe in your own words the two provisions freedom brings a believer.

- Look in your *Fire Bible* index for the article “False Teachers” and answer the following:
 - » How are false teachers described?

 - » What is a reason false teachers could fool godly people?

(Continued from *Fire Bible* article “False Teachers”)

- » What is the private life of a false teacher like?

- » What did God require from the Israelites before He would fulfill the promises?

- » Describe in your own words the two ways false teachers gain influence in the church.

- » According to God’s Word, what should believers do to prove the heart of teachers, leaders, or preachers in the church?

- » What are some ways a believer could discern the character of a teacher, preacher, or leader in the church?

- » What is the “fruit” of false teachers, preachers, or leaders?

- » What is the key issue in revealing a false messenger?

- Look in your *Fire Bible* index for the article “Faith and Grace” and answer the following:
 - » What is involved in true biblical faith?

