

MESSAGE FOR OCTOBER 18, 2026, FROM GALATIANS 5:13-16

We continue this week in our trek through Paul's letter to the Galatians. This letter addresses a **problem in the early church that was first revealed in the book of Acts**. The book of Acts is a history of the early church and in Luke's recorded history you might recall that, **after he records nine chapters of the Holy Spirit's saving work among Jews *only***, in chapter ten he reveals that God opened a new chapter in salvation history. For the first time since the days of Abraham 2000 years earlier, **God begins sovereignly bringing large numbers of non-Jews or Gentiles to himself**. The gospel was being preached to the Gentiles, and the Holy Spirit, in powerful and unmistakable ways, was coming upon Gentiles and giving them new life in Christ.

To a church that was exclusively Jewish, this was a shock. It took a while, not for the apostles, but for many Jews who had trusted in Jesus, to get used to the idea that **God was now causing Gentiles to be included as part of his people**. In Acts 15, Luke records the calling of the Jerusalem Council **for the purpose of discerning God's will as to how to relate to these new Gentile believers**. This council was important because not all Jews were in agreement as to how the church should respond to these new Gentile converts.

For instance, we read in verse one of Acts 15, "But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question..." Later in verse five we read that during the council, ⁵ "...some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.'" Sound familiar?

The point in citing this early church history is to remind us that **this discussion about what to do with Gentile converts did not originate with Paul and the false teachers in Galatia**. This had been an ongoing discussion within the church, and **God used the Jerusalem Council to issue an authoritative ruling on the question of the Gentiles**. That is, that **the gospel does NOT require Gentiles to keep the law of Moses or be circumcised to be saved. And that is what Paul taught to all the churches he planted**. That helps us see that what Paul is confronting in Galatia in the false teachers was **a remnant of the Jews in Jerusalem who had never accepted the ruling of the Jerusalem Council**.

As we come to our text for today in chapter five, Paul has mostly finished his argument against the false teachers and, as we've seen, **he's brought to bear a comprehensive indictment against the false teachers using biblical, theological and historical arguments**. Here in chapter five, **he's beginning to remind the Galatian believers how to live out the liberating truths of the gospel**. In today's text Paul begins to warn the Galatians that **Christian liberty—the freedom they have to not live under the enslavement of the law, must not be abused**.

Galatians reveals, **as it relates to the believer's relationship to the law, that there are two extreme positions**. One extreme is the one we've seen so far as taught by the Judaizers. That is, **you must live as if your righteousness or acceptance before God is dependent on your obedience to the law**. Paul calls this living "under the law." Today, many call this "legalism" because **it reduces Christianity to the hopeless quest of trying to be acceptable to God by following rules and laws**.

But here in our text Paul reveals **another extreme in relating to the law**. That is, instead of being legalistically enslaved by the law, **you live lawlessly—without regard to God’s law or holiness**. This is sometimes called **libertinism**. Professed believers, in the name of Christian liberty, live without any sense of moral restraint or responsibility before a holy God.

When I first began to be discipled as a believer, my discipler spoke frequently of how much he enjoyed his “Christian liberty.” The problem was that, in the name of his so-called “liberty,” he defended watching television programs that were downright worldly and promoted godless values. It’s **those challenges related to the law and Christian liberty** that Paul begins to address in our text for this morning. Let’s read again verses 13-15 of chapter five. Paul writes, “¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”

I see three truths here in Paul’s treatment where his argument is essentially **believers must rightly understand and apply their freedom in Christ**. In this section, Paul’s first truth is **the call of Christ to freedom**. Second is **the abuse of this freedom**. Third, **the main purpose of the call to Christian freedom**. We’re not going to get to verse 15 today. First, in verse 13 is the truth of **God’s call to freedom** where Paul says, “¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers...”

When a person is born-again and miraculously becomes a believer it’s because they were supernaturally called by God through the gospel. We looked at that last week. And when God calls believers, **he calls them into relationship with himself through his Son, Jesus Christ**. Jesus says in John 17:3, “³ And this is eternal life, that they *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

When God calls sinners to himself, **he does NOT call us to live morally upright lives by giving us a list of things to do for him**. That’s moralism and **it is sadly too often substituted for the gospel and real Christianity**. God calls believers into an intimate relationship with himself—to KNOW him and Jesus. We called as his adopted **sons and heirs**. When we reduce the Christian life to moralistically obeying a list of rules or laws, we turn it into a lifeless, empty shell. Paul says in Romans 14:17, “¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Being brought into the kingdom is not about **things like what you feel is appropriate to eat or drink. That’s an absurdly superficial counterfeit**. The Christian life is about **living in “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”**

It’s about living before your Father by enjoying him, cherishing him, treasuring him, wanting more than anything to bless him and make him look glorious to others. **THAT’S what Jesus died to bring us and it’s a life of freedom and liberty. It’s lived out within the context of a love relationship, not law-keeping**. I trust that’s the way you live your life in Christ, growing in your love relationship with Jesus as you experience more and more each day what a wonderful, glorious God and Savior he is.

We see this same dynamic even in human relationships. When a person falls in love, he/she may spend hours a week energetically seeking to bless their beloved. But they never think about it as **work**. They may exert tremendous amounts of energy...and do it with great joy. You mow her lawn

with joy to help her out. You spend money you don't really have to buy him a new sweater because you want to bless him.

There's no sense of enslavement to rules there. The "work" is done in the context of an impassioned love relationship. You don't tally up the number of hours you spend on your beloved, you give yourself willingly, sacrificially *and joyfully*. **There's a sense of tremendous liberty even though you may be expending many hours of work.** You're doing what you're doing because what YOU WANT TO DO IT not because some **rule book on dating** tells you that *you have* to do it.

We see this kind of spiritual liberty implied in Jeremiah chapter 31 when God predicts **the kind of relationship believers will have when he establishes a New Covenant with his people**. He writes, "³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Please notice that **the law of God is not removed in a New Covenant relationship with God**. The law reveals to us what is pleasing to God, what delights him, what is consistent with his holy nature and that is NOT removed. Freedom from the law comes NOT from the **removal** of the law but from its **relocation**. Under the Old Mosaic Covenant, the law was inscribed on tablets of stone. It was external—on the outside and sadly, it became to the Jews like an insatiable dictator **commanding in detail what, when and how God's people must DO things and what we must NOT do**. It is an exacting standard which we must follow perfectly.

In the New Covenant, the law is *not* removed but its written NOT on a stone tablet somewhere. Its written on the believer's heart by the indwelling Holy Spirit which means that **the law is no longer in an external and adversarial position to us**. The law no longer stands opposed to us like a dictator commanding us to **obey an endless list of commands, none of which we really want to do**. In the New Covenant, the law has now become *our friend* because it's been inscribed on our hearts and remember, in Scripture, our hearts are **where our desires come from**.

That means that in the New Covenant in Christ, the law now expresses the desires of our hearts because it tells us how we can bless our Beloved AND, the Spirit gives us the power to fulfill those desires. Because **believers have a new heart that WANTS to bless Jesus as our heavenly husband**, the law is now a precious resource enabling us to know how to better do that. **This is spiritual liberty because we're doing what we WANT to do out of our Holy Spirit-indwelt hearts, not what we HAVE to do under any external compulsion from the law.** This is the kind of spiritual freedom believers have been called to live out.

In the second half of verse 13, Paul speaks to **the abuse of God's call to freedom**. He says, "¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh..." The key to understanding what Paul means here is this phrase, "an opportunity for the flesh." Let's talk about what Paul means by "the flesh" here and in his other letters. When we are born into this world as sinners, we are part of Adam's race of fallen humanity. But when a sinner possessing that fallen, Adamic nature is born *again* into the kingdom of God, **they receive a new nature and are brought into a race of new humanity with Christ, not Adam as our new Head**. This is why Paul

in Romans chapter five calls Christ a “second Adam” because he is the Head of this new humanity in Jesus.

One great challenge to us is that **we live in a time between the first and second coming of Jesus.** In this interim period of redemptive history **before these bodies are glorified and our salvation is completed, in addition to all that we have in Christ, we also carry around within us a part of our humanity that is unredeemed; our sinful, unredeemed “flesh.”** Our sinful flesh is NOT the same thing as our bodies. **The “flesh,” though it resides in these bodies, is a spiritual part of us that is in rebellion to God.** Among other things, **our sinful flesh seeks to corrupt our natural bodily desires and turn them against God.** For instance, our flesh drives us to selfishly seek after—with absolutely no reference to God, things like self-indulging comforts, ease, illicit sex and many other worldly pleasures.

Our flesh seeks to corrupt all God’s blessings and turn them against God. The flesh can also be very religious, but **its religion is corrupt because, though it may speak and sing much about God, it is ultimately self-serving as it seeks in countless ways to exalt and glorify self, NOT God.** Because the flesh is housed in these bodies, that means that as long as these unredeemed bodies are alive, the sinful flesh will be part of us.

How believers are to respond to the flesh is in Romans 8:13 where Paul says, “¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Living according to the flesh means **surrendering to the selfish sins of the flesh.** Believers are called to **put to death the *fleshly* deeds of the body by the Holy Spirit.** We know from Ephesians chapter six that **we do that through the offensive, flesh-killing weapon of the Spirit—the SWORD of the Spirit, the word of God.**

We use the truth of God’s word to expose the lies of the flesh and kill them as we trust in the truth and promises of God’s word and live by faith. Killing the sinful deeds of the body is part of what Paul is talking about in verse 16 when he says, “¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” As we’ll see when we get there, part of walking by the Spirit is, by the Spirit, killing or putting to death *the fleshly*, rebellious deeds of the body.

Ok, with that as background, what does Paul mean when he says in verse 13, “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh?” As we saw, **the sinful flesh seeks to corrupt all things including any spiritual blessings from God.** So, as we think about **the spiritual liberty we have in Christ, the flesh seeks to corrupt that blessing of liberty into an excuse, reason, or opportunity to sinfully pursue the fleshly, self-centered pleasures of this world.** The flesh says, *“I can look at that racy video or picture because I’m free in Christ. I can habitually ignore my quiet time because I am free in Christ.”*

Our flesh seeks to corrupt our freedom by **causing us to believe the lie that our freedom entitles us to actively commit certain sins.** But it also seeks to convince us that **we are “free” to ignore, eliminate or indefinitely delay practicing certain godly, virtuous things like reading our bibles and prayer.** In other words, **the flesh seeks to compel us to commit either sins of commission or sins of omission.** The flesh lies to us by telling us to believe that **Jesus purchased on the cross ...the freedom to sin** when, in fact, the cross purchased us **the freedom to overcome sin.**

Paul is saying in verse 13, **don't let your sinful, self-centered flesh lead you into believing the lie that your spiritual freedom can be used for the purpose of indulging your sinful desires**. If you believe that, then you believe the Lord has granted you freedom to commit treason against him.

In the last sentence of verse 13 Paul gives ***the true purpose of God's call to freedom***. He says, **"13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."** Literally, Paul says we are to use our freedom in Christ to **"become slaves of one another."** That's a paradox which means that it seems like a contradiction that **God would liberate us from enslavement to the law so that we might become slaves to one another**, but it's not a contradiction when you understand what the bible teaches about humanity.

As we've said before, we must never forget that we are *created* beings. God created us and **as Creator, he has a kind of authority over humanity that is absolutely, utterly unique**. It's not possible to have more inherent authority over someone than a Creator has over his creation, including humanity. **A Creator has absolute right over his creatures because they owe literally everything to him including their existence**. He alone is their reason for our being. **Scripture reveals that God created us for his purposes and its for those purposes that we exist**. In that sense, humanity is a slave race. We were not created to do what WE in our fallen natures want—that runs completely against how God created us. We were created for ...another, for God and **his purpose for humanity is that *we might glorify him***. **We might show the created order how awesome he is**.

The Scriptures consistently teach these truths. In Isaiah 43:7 God is speaking of humanity as **"7everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."** We were created for God—for his glory—to show his wisdom and power. Later in the same chapter God speaks of **"21 the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise."** THAT is the purpose for which we were created—to live for GOD, NOT ourselves, and by our lives to declare his praise throughout creation.

Paul says the same thing in Colossians 1:16. **"16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him."** We were not created to wander about, satisfying our selfish impulses. THAT is contrary to our created purpose. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, **"31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."** When we do that, we are fulfilling our spiritual programming and purpose. That is how God wired us as his slave race of people—to bring him praise and glory.

But humanity is a fallen race. We fell into sin and **fallen humanity hates its purpose as vehemently as anything** because our sin causes us to passionately seek **independence from God** and do what WE want for ourselves. **Fallen humanity has believed the lie that we can be truly happy by pursuing what we think is best for us when the truth is, God wired us to find pleasure in living as his loving slaves (and children) and that includes living as a servant to one another**. When people do that, what Tim Keller calls "human flourishing" occurs. The happiest, most joy-filled people on the planet, bar none, are those who are doing what God created them to do and doing it with all their might for his glory. And John Piper is right when he says that ***"God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."***

Paul says in verse 13 that **our main purpose as it relates to others** is to “through love serve one another.” When we live as a slave for God, **the main way in which that is manifest is by living as a loving servant to others.** That means that **God frees us from being under the law, in part, so that we can serve him by lovingly serving one another.** This is not unique to the New Testament. **Notice from Exodus chapter four the way in which God tells Moses to command Pharaoh to release his children, the Jews, from their slavery.** He told Moses to command Pharaoh, “²³ and I say to you, ‘Let my son [Israel] go that he may serve me...’” God wants Moses to tell Pharaoh that he must release his people from their slavery so that they can become slaves of God.

We see this again in Leviticus where God in his law forbids his people from making slaves of one another. Listen to his rationale for this prohibition in chapter 25. “⁴² For they are *my servants*, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves.” The reason the Jews must not be sold as slaves is because **they are servants or slaves of God.** Paul’s point is that **we must use our freedom in Christ to do what God has wired us to do—lovingly serve one another.**

In verse 14, Paul gives us one rationale for this when he says, “¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” This is where this text can seem confusing! Perhaps you noticed the irony here. That is, that Paul’s rationale for **NOT living under the law is because living as a servant to others fulfills the law! The reason Christ has set us free from the enslavement to the law is so that we can fulfill the law.** Why would he argue this THAT way? When you see something in Scripture like this that is so ironic, please know that the author is intentionally using that irony to make his point.

It’s not as confusing as it sounds. The law IS enslaving when it comes to you and commands you, *“Keep me perfectly or you cannot be righteous. Your righteousness before God is dependent upon you observing me.”* THAT legalistic use of the law enslaves people because, as we’ve seen, the law—when we try to be righteous through it, brings a curse, not righteousness. **But the law, when rightly understood as a believer, is simply an expression of God’s will, and as sons of God, re-created in Christ and desiring to do God’s will, we love the law—it’s our friend because it helps us accomplish our created purpose.**

As we’ve seen, for the believer, the law is written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit **who gives us the power to increasingly fulfill the law from hearts filled with love for God and others.** We see this in Romans 13 where Paul says in verse eight, “⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” ⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Love is the fulfilling of the law. That means, if you are filled with love, **you can go way beyond any requirement the law stipulates** and let me give you an example of what this looks like. In Second Corinthians chapter eight, Paul writes of **the grace of God** given to the Macedonians, but as you’ll see, **it’s the grace of God expressed in love to impoverished people** and manifests in radically sacrificial service to those who are in great need.

He says this, 2 Corinthians 8:1–5. “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave

according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”

That is what **God’s grace in loving generosity and service to others looks like**. Out of their own extreme poverty, the Macedonian believers gave what they had with “a wealth of generosity.” They **begged for the favor** of giving “beyond their means” to bring relief to the saints in Jerusalem. They gave their money and they also gave themselves. Do you understand that **there is NO commandment in the law to live like that?**

No law in Scripture commands that kind of sacrifice where you are commanded **to beg for the favor of giving your money and yourselves and to do it all with an abundance of joy as you completely impoverish yourself**. There is no law anywhere in Scripture to do that! That is God’s grace expressed in sacrificial LOVE! That’s **not obedience to a law**, that’s what the love of Jesus looks like and *it fulfills the law*! This incredible grace of love **transcends any biblical law like an airplane transcends the law of gravity**. This love rises above the demands of the law! Love fulfills all the law because it does things that no law in Scripture commands.

As we close, I’d like you to think about these things by asking some questions. First, **Do you understand that your Christian liberty is not given for you to be comfy, lazy and lukewarm, but instead to outperform the law with joy! Is that the way you live?** Or do you use your freedom as an excuse to indulge your laziness? Or, to put it differently, **do you experience the joy of the Lord as you give yourself away in loving service to others? That’s the main purpose of our Christian liberty**. When Paul writes so passionately about the Galatians’ need to reject the teaching of the false teachers, he does that, first and foremost, because **he knows believing in a righteousness according to the law is a denial of the gospel and it can send you to hell because it cancels out God’s grace**.

But a second reason he writes so passionately about the gospel is because he knows that **no believer can love others or fulfill the law in a way that glorifies Christ if he/she has not been liberated from the enslaving power of the law. If you’re lazy and addicted to creature comforts of this world and not energetically, sacrificially and joyfully serving others, something ...is ...wrong!** Maybe **you’re like the Galatians and enslaved to the law**—you haven’t really lived out the gospel. That kind of legalism completely closes off the conduit of faith through which the Spirit works. Maybe **you have unrepentant sin in your life** that is quenching the influence of the radical love of the Holy Spirit in you for others.

Or maybe **you’re not a believer** and have not been given the Holy Spirit at all. By God’s grace, you need to spend some serious time finding out why love for others and energetic, sacrificial, joyful service to them is NOT the hallmark of your life. That is a big reason why God liberated us in Christ. May God give us the grace to live in liberty so that we can live out our creation purposes for his glory and our joy.