

“Free to Serve”

(Galatians 5:13-15)

Introduction

➤ People talk a lot about freedom. We talk about our personal liberties, constitutional rights, and American independence. Yet, for the most part, we are a people in bondage. In all the conversations concerning our freedoms, our greatest freedom is rarely mentioned and often scoffed at. For our most universal bondage – our most damaging and deadly enslavement – is our bondage to sin.

John 8:34 ~ “Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.’”

Titus 3:3 ~ “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.”

➤ Unfortunately, even for Christians, the biblical teaching concerning Christian freedoms is often misunderstood and misapplied. It is wrongly asserted that Christians are free to live however they want, with little to no regard for biblical commands or instructions. Many use their “freedom” in Christ to explain (a vain attempt to excuse/justify) their sinful behavior, declaring that they can live in sin because they are saved by grace – or even going so far as to say that since they live by the Spirit they are no longer obligated to live under any standard of righteousness or holiness.

John 8:36 ~ “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

➤ The truth is, Christ has set us (believers) free from the penalty and power of sin. He has freed us from our bondage to sin.

*The Christian's freedom in Christ does not enable them to do whatever they want,
but enables them – for the very first time – to do what God wants
(see Galatians 5:1, 16-17; Romans 8:5, 7-8).*

➤ Here is just a small sampling of Scriptures that show that true Christians do not use the grace of God as a license to sin.

Gal 5:1 ~ “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Gal 5:16-17 ~ “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

Rom 6:1-2 ~ “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (see Rom.6:7, 18, 20, 22)

Rom 8:5-8 ~ “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (see Rom.8:2)

➤ Once again, we need to be reminded that, in this letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul was writing to “the churches of Galatia” (1:2). In his letter, Paul is rebuking the Galatian Christians for the ease in which they abandoned the true Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – for “a different Gospel” (1:6) which is really no gospel at all (1:7). Generally speaking, there are two main ways in which the true Gospel is distorted into a false gospel.

The first way is through legalism – the teaching that a person is saved, either in part or in whole, by the righteous/religious works they do. This was the particular problem for these Galatian Christians is that they had been influenced by false teachers (i.e. Judaizers) who taught that Gentiles needed to be circumcised (among other Jewish customs and laws) in order to be saved (see Gal.2:3, 7, 8, 9). Paul reminded the Galatians that such (self-righteous) legalistic works is neither required for salvation, nor a part of the truth Gospel of Jesus Christ (see Gal.2:16; 6:15). In fact, Paul warned that the pursuit of legalism is a departure from Christ, the true Gospel of Christ, making one accountable to keep the whole law and leaving them without the saving grace of God (see Gal.5:2-6).

A second way people distort the true Gospel is by liberalism (or libertarianism, antinomianism) – the teaching that a Christian can continue to live in sin because they are saved by grace (see Rom.6:1-2; 1Jn.3:9). This represents those who seek to use the Gospel as their “get out of hell free” card. They profess Jesus as Savior, but reject Him as Lord.

✓ **Illust:** “Someone has pictured legalism and libertinism as two parallel streams that run between earth and heaven. The stream of legalism is clear, sparkling, and pure; but its waters run so deep and furiously that no one can enter it without being drowned or smashed on the rocks of its harsh demands. The stream of libertinism, by contrast, is relatively quiet and still, and crossing it seems easy and attractive. But its waters are so contaminated with poisons and pollutants that to try to cross it is also certain death. Both streams are uncrossable and deadly, one because of impossible moral and spiritual demands, the other because of moral and spiritual filth.

But spanning those two deadly streams is the bridge of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the only passage from earth to heaven. The two streams lead to death because they are man’s ways. The gospel leads to life because it is God’s way” (John MacArthur; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians*; 5:13-15).

➤ Both legalism and liberalism are distortions of the Gospel, and therefore promote a false gospel. Legalism is no cure for liberalism, as liberalism is no cure for legalism. They are both man’s attempt to distort – whether adding to or taking away from – God’s saving grace. Amid his warnings against the dangerous errors of legalism, Paul exhorted the Galatian Christians to avoid equally dangerous false gospel of liberalism.

Gal 5:13-15 ~ “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. ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ¹⁵But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”

➤ In these three verses (Gal.5:13-15), we find three distinct aspects of the Christian’s freedom in Christ: the basis of our freedom in Christ (vs.13a), the practice of our freedom in Christ (vs.13b), and the purpose of our freedom in Christ (vs.14-15).

A. The Basis of our Freedom in Christ (vs.13a)

➤ The freedom the Christian has in Christ is the freedom to live according to the will of God and by the power of the Spirit of God. In verse thirteen, we read: “*For you were called to freedom, brothers*” (vs.13). Here Paul is taking them back to the very basis of their freedom in Christ – the sovereign and salvific call of God upon their lives. The Christian’s freedom in Christ is not established by religious leaders or secular society. It does not change at the whims of philosophy or culture. It is not dependent on man’s goodness or good works. The Christian’s freedom in Christ is established by God and for God.

➤ Christians are the “*called*” (*kaleō*) of God. They have been “called” by God for salvation.

Gal 1:6 ~ “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”

➤ Implicit in this verse is a two-fold understanding of God’s call on the believer’s life.

1. By God's sovereign initiative

It is God who initiated our salvation in Christ. For the sinner is “*dead in ... sins*” (Eph.2:1), and therefore unable to live righteousness or call out to God for salvation.

2 Tim 1:9 ~ “[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (see 2Thess.2:13-14; 1Pet.2:9)

Rom 8:28-30 ~ “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

1 Cor 1:26-31 ~ “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

The Christian's freedom in Christ is initiated by God's sovereign will “*before the foundation of the world*” (Eph.1:4; see Acts 13:48; 2Tim.1:9; 1Pet.1:20). It is therefore not subject to change – embellished or diminished. This is one reason why Paul so emphatically stated that there is only one Gospel:

Gal 1:8-9 ~ “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not man's idea, man's initiative, or man's creation. It is based on the sovereign, omniscient and unfailing will of God.

2. By God's saving grace

As we have seen throughout this epistle (in fact, throughout all Scripture), salvation is by God's grace alone. God does not call those who are worthy of His calling, for no one is inherently or meritoriously worthy of God's saving grace. Jesus said, “*I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance*” (Lk.5:32).

Gal 2:16 ~ “yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

Eph 2:5-10 ~ “even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved ... ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Titus 3:5 ~ “[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit”

2 Tim 1:9 ~ “who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began”

Salvation simply cannot be by grace *and* works. First, as we have seen, the sinner is absolutely dependent on God’s saving grace in order to any good (righteous) works (see Is.64:6; Rom.8:7-8). Secondly, the very nature of God’s saving grace is unmerited (unearned, undeserved).

Rom 11:6 ~ “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”

- When we read “*you were called to freedom*” (vs.13), we must first recognize that this is referring to God’s sovereign and gracious call to salvation.

B. The Practice of our Freedom in Christ (vs.13b)

- The second aspect of the Christian’s freedom is its practice. The apostle wrote: “... *Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another*” (vs.13). Wanting to make sure he was not misunderstood, Paul emphasized that the true Christian does not express his/her freedom in Christ by living in sin.
- In this verse, the practice of the Christian’s freedom in Christ is two-fold – stated first negatively (what not to do) and then positively (what to do).

1. Striving against sin

Rather than being a license to sin, the Christian’s freedom is the pursuit of holiness and righteousness. The statement, “... *Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh*” (vs.13) prohibits the Christian from trying to distort or abuse God’s saving grace. The “*flesh*” (*sarx*) here represents our sinful nature and sinful desires. It is used in opposition to “the Spirit”, indicating that a person is either living by “the flesh” (vs.19-21) or by “the Spirit” (vs.22-23):

Gal 5:16-17 ~ “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

The true Christian does not try to exploit God’s grace. They do not seek to use their freedom in Christ “*as an opportunity for the flesh*” (vs.13). The word Greek word translated “*opportunity*” (vs.13; *aphormē*) comes from a military term for a base of operations. This serves as an apt illustration for this prohibition: “The idea is that we must not allow sin to use our freedom in Christ as a beachhead to launch a spiritual attack against us” (Philip Graham Ryken; *Reformed Expository Commentary: Galatians*; p.217-218). God’s grace does not give Christian’s a license to sin.

Jude 4 ~ “For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”

The Christian’s freedom does not afford the Christian to sin as much as they want (knowing that God’s grace covers all sin). Rather, the Christian’s freedom enables them – for the first time – do actually do what God wants. We are called not to indulge in sin but to strive against sin.

Gal 5:18 ~ “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

Gal 2:20 ~ “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Gal 6:14 ~ “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Rom 6:6 ~ “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”

Rom 8:13 ~ “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.”

Those who are living in sin are enslaved to sin (Jn.8:34). The true Christian has been freed from sin, freed to live according to the will and Word of God.

2. Serving one another

On the positive end of this command, Christians are commanded to “... *through love serve one another*” (vs.13). This is the beachhead of the Christian’s freedom. Our freedom in Christ does not compel us to live in sin, but to serve one another through the love of Christ.

We can identify three parts to this positive command.

a. The command: “serve”

The Greek word translated “*serve*” (vs.13; *douleuete/douleuō*) is an imperative command which here represents a command. This word carries the strong imagery of being enslaved or in bondage. The exact form of this verb (*douleuete*) is used only twice in the New Testament. The same word is found in Paul’s letter to the Colossians as he specifically addressed those who were in slavery:

Col 3:22-24 ~ “Bondservants [*doulos*], obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving [*douleuete/douleuō*] the Lord Christ.”

Elsewhere in Galatians Paul used a form of this verb in describing the non-Christians enslavement to the idols and worldly philosophies:

Gal 4:8 ~ “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved [*douleuō*] to those that by nature are not gods.”

Gal 4:9 ~ “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves [*douleuō*] you want to be once more?”

Gal 4:25 ~ “Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery [*douleuō*] with her children.”

Stated in a different way, Christians are exhorted to be servants of one another.

b. The motive: “love”

It is important to note that the motive for such servanthood is “*love*” (vs.13; *agapē*). Christians are not to serve one another as a means of earning or securing their salvation. Nor are they to serve as an act of heartless obligation. We are called to serve one another in and through the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gal 5:6 ~ “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”

John 13:34-35 ~ “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This “*love*” (*agapē*) is the highest and purest form of love (1Cor.13). It denotes a love that transcends feelings and emotions. It is sacred, selfless, and sacrificial. It is the love that God has for His Son, and the Son has for the Father (Jn.17:26). It is the love that God has for us as His adopted children (Rom.5:8). It is the love that Christ has for those who have received Him as Lord and Savior (Rom.8:35, 39). It is a love that we are to have for one another.

1 John 4:7-9 ~ “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

c. **The object: “one another”**

The third part of this command is the object. That is, the immediate target of our loving service. The object of our service is “*one another*” (*allēlōn*). Let me point out a simple, yet often overlooked, aspect of this command. We are not called to serve ourselves. We are not called to serve only our family, or our friends, or our self-interests. We are not called to make sure others serve us. We are called to sacrificial and selfless service.

Mark 10:43-45 ~ “But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant [*diakonos*], ⁴⁴and whoever would be first among you must be slave [*doulos*] of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man came not to be served [*diakoneō*] but to serve [*diakoneō*], and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

This, it seems, is a particular problem in our contemporary society. To be sure, there are many professing Christians who are able to serve but chose not to serve at all. They are, for various reasons/excuses, content to be served (“get fed”) whenever they want and however they want. They are merely spectators and consumers, who use the church to fulfill their own personal (selfish) wants and needs.

Yet, even for those who do serve, there is a temptation to serve only those who we love or in ministries that benefit us. Some families, for example, only serve in the church where it directly affects their family (when their kids are babies they serve in the nursery, when their kids are older they serve in children’s church/AWANA, when their kids are teenagers they serve in youth group, when their kids are grown they do not serve at all).

The command to serve “*one another*” (*allēlōn*) is specifically a command for Christians – Christians serving other Christians. To be sure, Christians are called to love everyone – even their enemies (Matt.5:44; Lk.25-37; Rom.13:9-10). But we are specifically called to serve “*one another*” (*allēlōn*) in the church.

✓Note: While the English word “another” can simply refer as something in addition to, or as an alternative, the Greek word is much more specific. The Greek word Jesus used in saying “another” (*allos*) can specifically refer to another of the same kind. For example, Jesus instructs believers who are struck on the right cheek to offer the “other” cheek also (Mt.5:39); Jesus restores a man’s hand so that it is just like “the other” (Matt.12:13); Jesus is crucified along with two “others,” who have been convicted of crimes (Jn.19:18) [whereas *heteros* is often used to describe another of a different kind]. When Jesus called the Spirit “another Helper”, He meant, “He will be a Helper like me.”

Gal 6:10 ~ “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

For if we cannot love and serve one another in the church as Christians, how are we going to love and serve those in the world who are non-Christians? The church is to display to the world the love, humility, grace and truth of Christ.

C. The Purpose of our Freedom in Christ (vs.14-15)

➤ Clearly, as we have seen, Christ Jesus died on the cross to save us from the penalty and power (and one day, presence) of sin. He was not crucified so that we could continue to live in sin. In verses 14-15, we find two main reasons for obeying God's command to truly live free in Christ.

1. To fulfill God's law

The first reason is to fulfill God's law: *"For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" (vs.14). It is perhaps surprising to read about the law after we have read that Christians are no longer under the law (see Gal.2:16, 19; 3:10; 5:3). But again, it is good to be reminded that being free from the law does not mean that one lives contrary to the law. It means we are no longer under the penalty of the law.

Rom 7:13 ~ "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

As we have seen, the Christian is neither lawless nor legalistic. Christians live by the (indwelling) power of God's Holy Spirit, which compels them to pursue God's holiness and righteousness – to live like Christ. The fullness of this all-consuming pursuit is to *"love ... God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"* (Matt.22:37), and to *"love your neighbor as yourself"* (vs.14; Matt.22:39).

Matt 22:34-40 ~ "But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' ³⁷And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'" (see Deut.6:5)

Rom 13:8-10 ~ "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For 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.' ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

The Christian does not reject the law of God, even though they are no longer obligated to the law. Rather, the true Christian seeks to fulfill God's law out of love for God and His will for their lives.

2. To fulfill God's love

We do not – indeed cannot – obtain or secure God's love by our obedience. God has loved His children with an everlasting love (Jer.31:3; cf. Deut.7:7-9). For God *"chose us in him before the foundation of the world"* (Eph.1:4; 2Tim.1:9), and *"In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ"* (Eph.1:4-5; cf. 1Pet.1:20). In the epistle of 1 John we read: *"We love [Him] because He first loved us"* (1Jn.4:19). The Christian does not merit God's love by (doing) anything – not their repentance, faith, or good works. The Christian obeys God not to earn God's love but in response to God's love.

The result of this is a Christlike love that is to permeate everything the Christian does. When Christians fail to love, as God has commanded them to love, the result is destructive and dishonoring to God.

Stated in the negative, Christians are not to *“bite and devour one another”* (vs.15; words often used to describe the attack of snakes and wild animals). This verse has been referred to as “Christian cannibalism.” For it graphically illustrates what Christians do when they are not loving and serving one another. This figuratively describes the destructive behaviors that are often associated with sin, discord, and disunity (see 1Cor.1:11; 3:3; 6:6-8; Jms.4:1-3).

Paul warns – *“watch out”* (vs.15; *blepō*) – that if we *“bite and devour one another”* we will be *“consumed by one another”* (vs.15). The Greek word translated “consumed” (*analiskō*) can refer to being eaten or destroyed. Its only other occurrence in the New Testament is found in the Gospel of Luke:

Luke 9:54 ~ “And when his disciples James and John saw it [i.e. the Samaritans rejecting Jesus], they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’”

Unfortunately, many of us have seen the “consuming” destruction that occurs when Christians fail to love and serve one another through love. This is neither good for the Christian nor for the church, and it is certainly not for the glory of Christ.

Conclusion

➤ The Christian’s freedom in Christ enables them – for the very first time – to live according to God’s will. It empowers us to live by the Spirit of God, and not by our sinful desires. Those who understand the freedom they have in Christ live consecrated lives of obedience to God. May we strive to do so, for the good of Christ’s church and glory of God.

John 17:1-3 ~ “When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’”

John 17:6-11 ~ “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”

John 17:20-26 ~ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”