

## The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

### Lesson 15: Called to Freedom (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. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”**

Our culture has placed a high priority on freedom. The last century has seen the liberation of black slaves, the liberation of women for equal right, equal pay, and even the ability to vote. In 2019, the attention of our society is upon the equal treatment (and almost championed and celebrated lifestyles) of lesbian, gay and trans-sexual people. My purpose in bringing up these groups of people isn't to comment upon how effective the liberation of these individuals have been, as there are individuals on all three fronts who still feel as though they are unfairly treated in today's world. My point isn't to generate debate on these issues, but is simply to point out that these are widely considered to be very important issues in our world today. The greatest desire that people have today is to live their lives with the maximum allowance of freedom they can, to do what they want to do. The United States of America is after all, “The land of the free, and the home of the brave.”

We ought to be thankful that we live in a country that offers us the freedom to live our life this way, there are many places in the world where our lives would be in jeopardy for doing just what we're doing right now. But there is a particular freedom that Paul mentions in our text today that we are called too. It's a freedom that is specifically a Christian freedom, it is something that separates the believer from the world. It is a freedom to love and serve one another that the Christian is called to live, meaning that it's a freedom that is lived out by application of the truths that the Christian believes from the scriptures. It is a freedom that ought to be a visible mark to the watching world that we are in Christ. And yet ironically, of all the words that unbelievers would use to categorize Christians, 'freedom' might be the very last one. The world around us looks at Christians and calls them 'slaves to religion', and the second last word they might use of a Christian is 'loving', they're more likely to call a Christian 'bigoted'. When people think of Christians, they think of people who aren't allowed to go here or there, aren't allowed to watch this or that, can't say this, can't eat that, can't drink this, can't associate with that person. They see our lives as though we are hedged-in on every side, with God cramping our style at every turn. They see how Christian women behave in modesty and submission to their husbands, and they conclude that there is an abuse of love in the family, that the husband is dominating and emotionally abusing a weak and timid woman. They see how Christians (although they are kind to members of the LGBTQ movement) call sin 'sin', and therefore Christians are judged as unloving, and archaic in thought, brainwashed by a book that is thousands of years old.

In the midst of the times that we live in, and the pressures of society upon us, how are we to understand and live out the freedom that we are called too? Primarily, the freedom that Paul is talking about is the freedom from being bound to the law as a system of governing our lives (with its ceremonies and traditions) as a means of justification. In Judaism, the Old Testament law was unnecessarily expounded and weighed down upon the shoulders of the individual so much that it was impossible to keep the law. The law was a frustrating and oppressive law. There was a reason why the law was so heavy upon them, it was because they feared freedom, and we see the same fear today. The root of the fear came from the philosophy that people with freedom would surely abuse that freedom and wind up in even more

spiritual bondage. The people were far more comfortable to live their lives in debt to God, than to live their lives as though they not only had no debt, but had abundant riches. The Judaizers saw the gospel as a license to commit any sin, with the cross of Christ being used as a divine payment plan. Paul had an answer to that argument in Romans 6:1-4, **“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”** This is the Christian position regarding the freedom from the law that Christ purchased for us, and yet our adherence to the law anyways. There is a way to be free from the Law of Moses, and yet not live wild and free like a pagan. There is a way to ensure that a person still obey the law, and yet be free from its bondage. The gospel is not a ‘get out of jail free’ card.

Verse 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.”** It was certainly true that the gospel brought liberation to sinners. Paul just wrote a few verses prior in 5:1, **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”** However, that liberation had its limitations. The first intended liberation of the gospel of Jesus Christ was the liberation from the penalty of our sin. Jesus said in John 8:34-36, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”** The second intended liberation of the gospel of Jesus Christ was from serving the religious law as a means of justification, whether that be the Mosaic law, ([Gal. 3:13](#)) or a pagan law ([Gal. 4:8-9](#)). But there was limitations to the extent of their liberation. I’ll always remember the way the Pastor Scott explained this to me nearly twenty years ago when God brought me to this church. He said something like, *“God has given me the freedom to jump from the roof of this building if I wanted too, but He has not given me the freedom to jump onto the roof from the ground.”*

The gospel takes the shackles off of us, but it does not give us the right to do whatever we please. This is what Paul was after when he warned against using their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. He similarly warned in Romans 13:14, **“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”** When Paul uses the word ‘flesh’ in scripture, he means more than our skin, he is referring to mankind apart from God. More specifically, he is referring to the heart, and will, and emotion of a person outside of the influence of God’s Spirit within them. Every Christian has the indwelling Holy Spirit at work within them, while at the same time, the flesh is still present and waging war in their members.

Perhaps this is a good time to define once again the state of the ‘flesh’ within us. By that, I mean, is ‘flesh’ that is present within us sick, or dead? How we answer that simple question will shape a massive chunk of our theology. For all of most of us here today, we know that the answer found consistently throughout scripture is that our flesh is dead. It’s important that we have this understanding as we consider this passage, because if we label the flesh as sick, then we will be inclined to believe that some are more sick than others, and we’d be inclined to believe that the liberation from the gospel assuredly brought much healing to the flesh. We must agree with scripture that we are **“dead in the trespasses and sin in which (we) once walked”** (Eph. 2:1). The flesh never improves. It cannot get even the slightest bit healthier because it is dead. The Christian must understand the dead state of our flesh, and

the present residence of the flesh in our bodies, if we are to walk in a worthy manner in our newfound freedom in Christ.

What I found quite interesting is the way in which Paul ends verse 13. Speaking of the misuse of our freedom, to gratify the sinful cravings of our flesh, he commands us to serve one another. The Greek word that he uses for serving one another is *douleuete*, which is literally translated “be slaving for one another”. IOW, Paul is contrasting their former manner of life, which included slavish work towards the law, and their present life (now liberated from that slavery) where they can now tirelessly work at loving one another. For the first time in their lives, God had given them the liberty to pursue, not what they wanted, but what God wanted, in their lives. We have the example of our Lord before us to see how perfect sinlessness is lived out. Romans 15:3, **“For Christ did not please Himself...”** Perfect sinlessness is manifested in perfect selflessness. Certainly, the Holy Spirit of God indwelling in a Christian will give us the liberty to live selflessly as He shapes us into the image of Christ, not selfishly as the flesh would have it. Spurgeon wrote, *“You are not to do anything because it pleases you, but you are to do everything because it pleases God. When a man is no longer a slave to sin, or self, or Satan let him begin to serve his brothers: “through love serve one another.” Oh, if that “one word” were so engraved on our hearts as to influence all our lives, what blessed lives of love to God and love to men we should lead!”*<sup>1</sup>

Do you remember the Lord’s response to the bickering of the disciples in Luke 22:24-27? **“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”** For the Christian to be one who uses their freedom to lovingly serve one another is exactly the character of Christ formed in them.

Verse 14, **“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** Quite the opposite of using our freedom in Christ to live free from the burden of the law, Paul speaks of how a believer has the opportunity to fulfill the law with their freedom. Jesus, answering the Pharisee concerning which was the greatest commandment, said, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”** (Matt 22:37-40) The principle behind what Jesus is saying is that if we are loving other people entirely, then the law is fulfilled. You’re not going to murder someone you love. You aren’t going to lust after someone you love. You’re not going to steal from someone you love. You won’t lie to someone you love. The law is fulfilled when we love one another perfectly. The problem is that we don’t love each other perfectly, but just because we can’t perfectly love and fulfill the law, doesn’t mean we make no effort. Tim Keller wrote,

*“Take a lie, for example. On the one hand, gospel freedom means that I do not have to fear that I will be cast off from God if I lie. I am free from the legal penalty of that lie. The person who is seeking to be perfectly honest as a way of winning God’s favor will be devastated when they slip and lie. But the gospel assures us that dishonesty will not condemn us.*

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Charles *Commentary: Galatians* Lexham Press, p. 116

*However, let's ask: Why did I even want to lie? It will be because we felt that we needed what we faced losing if we told the truth. A person who must have approval, power, comfort or success to have joy or worth will lie to get, or to keep, that functional savior. A person who knows the gospel, in their affections as well as their intellectual understanding, will say: I don't need this thing. Therefore I can tell the truth. If I lied, it would not change my standing before God—I'm free to lie. But there's no need to lie—why would I want to?*

*The gospel does free you to live any way you want. But if you truly understand through the gospel who Jesus is and what He has done for you, then you will ask: How can I live for Him? And the answer will be—look at the will of God expressed in the law. The gospel frees us from the law, for the law. It does away with our old, selfishly motivated and unloving law-obedience. And it motivates us to obey the law out of love.”<sup>2</sup>*

Paul wrote in Romans 13:8-10, **“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”**

It's the heart of love that fulfills the law, not the head of legal accomplishment. God is not after cold-hearted flaming hoop-jumpers. Imagine a father who only did right for his children because the law told him too, or a husband who merely treated his wife fairly because he was bound to do so. We certainly wouldn't see any love in that. So it is with God's expectation of our love expressed back to Him. God isn't interested in cold-hearted devotion, He loves us and desires that we serve Him back out of a heart of love. Interestingly, in Exodus chapter 20, God gave the ten commandments to Moses. And at the start of the very next chapter, God paints us a beautiful picture of what it means to serve Him out of love. Exodus 21:2-6, **“When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, “I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,” then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.”**

Here is a picture of Christian liberty. At one time we were slaves of sin, and because of Christ we are now freed from the penalty of sin. But because of our gratitude and love for Christ, we now willingly profess our love and devotion to Christ, and we pledge our allegiance to Him forever. We bind our hearts together with Christ, to serve Him as a slave forever.

We probably all know Romans 6:23, **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** But consider the heart of obedience spoken of in the verse right before it, verse 22, **“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.”** It's the inner heart devotion to God that pleases

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, Timothy *Galatians For you* TGB Company p. 144

Him. Our Christian liberty ought to produce in us a selfless love to others that causes others to be blessed, and to love and grow in Christ.

Verse 15, **“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”** Paul’s choice of imagery is quite helpful. You can picture a jungle atmosphere where every predator is biting and devouring any animal that crosses its path. The picture is nothing but bloodshed and death. This is the picture that Paul paints will happen, if the Galatians do not use their freedom to love one another. The Christian life, lived void of love, becomes nothing more than a group of people living selfishly according to a strict law, with no spiritual life in them. According to Homer Kent, the structure of verse 15 uses *indicative verbs*, which tells us that this biting and devouring was happening in Galatia, and thus Paul was warning them. The Judaizers had brought a teaching into the church that polluted the salvation found in Christ alone through God’s grace alone. And this teaching had no doubt brought division, and confusion, and slander, and misrepresentation into the church as people were divided over the issue. John Calvin warns, *“When the devil tempts us to disputes, that the disagreement of members within the Church can lead to nothing but the ruin and consumption of the whole body. How unhappy, how mad it is, that we who are members of the same body should voluntarily conspire together for mutual destruction.”*<sup>3</sup> Paul’s warning to them, was such that if they were not careful, they would consume one another (thus splitting the church, and driving others away from the faith). I will let Spurgeon close our lesson,

*“My master, the Lord Jesus Christ, was the poor man’s friend. Never a syllable fell from His lips that would make a tyrant feel at ease in his despotism. Never did He say anything that would make the oppressive master feel that he had any right to tread down his workmen. Never did He utter a line that would make the workman feel that he had a right to be envious of those who possess more talents or enjoy higher privileges than he had. His teaching was justice, and His life was love. If you ask me for a man in all respects, I can only commend you to the person and character of my Lord.*

*If you are to become imitators of Him, the husband will be the kindest and the most loving of all fathers; the mother will be the most tender and amiable of mothers and wives. If you have been forgiven by Christ, and so love Him mightily and imitate Him diligently, you will be such men and women that no pastor need be ashamed to say, “They belong to my flock.” No fellow Christians will need to be ashamed to own you as one of their fraternity.*

*There is growing up in this country, I fear, more and more a feeling of alienation one from another. I cannot speak as some do of “the good old times,” for I believe the times were never as old as they are now, and never as good. But I do grieve to see that different classes are arrayed against each other. It will bode ill for our country if this jealousy goes on, for rivalries provoke resentment. God has given us preeminence among the sons of men in many respects, and if the house would not be divided against itself, it would prosper. If everyone will resolve to love his neighbor as himself, and to seek his brother’s good, each one seeking and satisfied with that which is just and equal, whether occupying the higher or the lower, or the middle place, manifold distractions would be averted from many districts! Indeed, if we will each one do more and be generous and kind and loving, we shall be benefactors indeed and bless our country. I do not know by what process we can be brought to do this so surely, and so reasonably, as by our believing in Jesus Christ. Feeling gratitude and love to Him, then imitating Him, and then*

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, John *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* Eerdmans p.102

*becoming like Him, we shall verify, in our triumph over the world, the virtue of faith by which alone the victory can be won.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Spurgeon, Charles *Commentary: Galatians* Lexham Press, p.119-120