

Freedom In Christ

DO WE HAVE TO WORK OUR WAY TO HEAVEN?

Focal Verses • GALATIANS 5:1-17

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will REVIEW Paul's teaching about life in the Spirit as foundational for Christian holiness, CELEBRATE the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives, and EMBRACE new ways of creating openness to the Spirit's leading.

In Focus

"What's wrong with you, Cheryl?" Chanel asked as her sister came in and slumped down on the couch.

"I'm tired. Between soup kitchen duty and my usher board meeting, I was helping the night ministry collect clothes for the homeless. It's exhausting serving God's people."

"I suppose," replied Chanel. "You have to pace yourself."

"I think I'm joining the sick-and-shut-in committee next. That would be good, right?"

"Sounds like you have too much on your plate already. You might want to slow down."

"Not if I want to get to heaven. Aren't we supposed to serve one another?" asked Cheryl.

"Yes, but we should serve as an outpouring of God's love for us, not to gain points with Him."

"Ouch! Am I that calculating?"

"Hey, I know your intentions are good," Chanel reassured Cheryl. "Just understand that God has freely given us His grace, and because of that, we have His favor. So we don't have to figure out what to do when we can seek the Holy Spirit to guide our lives."

In today's text, we learn that Christian freedom offers the opportunity of a Spirit-led life. Why is it so easy for believers to get caught up in the extremes of legalism or catering to their fleshly desires?



Keep in Mind

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

2 Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.

3 For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.

4 Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

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

6 For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.

7 Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?

8 This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you.

9 A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

10 I have confidence in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded: but he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be.

11 And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased.

12 I would they were even cut off which trouble you.

13 For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

15 But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.

16 This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

17 For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

The People, Places, and Times

Galatia. The Galatia of the New Testament was an area in what is now north central Turkey, where people of many different cultural backgrounds lived together. The Gauls, a Celtic people, had invaded the Asia Minor peninsula by invitation of the king of Bithynia, who enlisted their help in fighting civil wars. They eventually settled in parts of the region formerly known as Cappadocia and Phrygia. The area became a Roman province in 25 BC. Because of Rome's tendency to rezone its provinces, the Galatians Paul addressed in his letter would not have only been inhabitants of Galatia proper, but also citizens of other nearby regions.

Circumcision. Circumcision is a symbol of God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17).

Every male among Abraham's people (blood relatives and servants) was to be circumcised. Although circumcision was common in ancient societies, the Abrahamic covenant's circumcision was unique in that after the initial group of men was circumcised, the ritual was from then on practiced on eight-day-old infant boys. When circumcision was written down as part of the Law (Leviticus 12:3), Moses shared the procedure's spiritual understanding by "instructing the Israelites to circumcise their hearts" (Deuteronomy 10:16), which meant that in addition to the physical sign, they were also under God's covenant and had to follow His instructions. As Judaism grew, circumcision also became a symbol of Jewish identity, especially in the Greco-Roman

Empire, where the dominant culture did not circumcise their males.

Background

At the time Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians, a group of Jewish Christians, known as Judaizers, was teaching that Gentile converts needed to be circumcised both as a sign of their covenant with God and a means of justification or being made right with Him. They also insisted the Gentile Christians also observe other parts of Mosaic Law. Paul and others of like mind found the demand for circumcision was in contradiction to salvation by the grace of Jesus Christ. The debate about circumcision and the Law in the growing Christian community had created such division among believers that it threatened to implode Christianity. In chapter 4, Paul reminds the Galatians that before they knew God, they had been slaves to pagan gods, and he asks them why they would want to be slaves once again now that God knows them (Galatians 4:8–9). Paul tells them they are not the children of bondage, but of freedom (4:31).

At-A-Glance

1. Be Not Entangled (Galatians 5:1–6)
2. Stay on the Right Course (vv. 7–12)
3. Called to Be Free (vv. 13–17)

In Depth

1. Be Not Entangled (Galatians 5:1–6)

Today's text begins in the middle of Paul's efforts to persuade the Galatians to not follow false teachers who want them to be subject to Mosaic Law. Paul urges the Galatians to stand firm in the freedom Christ has set before them. The yoke or burden of bondage, a metaphor for the Law, is meant to illustrate that the Law

stands in contrast to the yoke of Christ, which is easy and light (Matthew 11:29–30). Anyone who accepts circumcision must observe the entire Law, "for whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10, KJV). In this regard, those under the Law are in constant debt, because keeping all the statutes without fail is impossible. Paul writes that anyone seeking to be right with God through observing the Law has in fact "fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4, KJV). In essence, for those intending to follow the Law, the grace of Jesus Christ is useless to them because they have forsaken the advantages of His free gift of grace. To persuade the Galatians to not be entangled by the Law, Paul explains that the Holy Spirit and faith, not the Law, make their relationships with God right (v. 5). He adds that in Christ, it is of no consequence whether one is circumcised because what matters is faith manifested in love.

2. Stay on the Right Course (Galatians 5:7–12)

In verse 7, Paul reminds the Galatians that when they were new believers, they were striving in the faith. However, false teachers wanted to divert them from truth. These people's plans are not the work of God, and their teachings do not reflect the foundation of Christianity: "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9, KJV). To illustrate the harm these false teachings could cause, Paul compares them to yeast, a fungus which, when a small amount is used, can spread throughout the whole dough. If these teacher's tongues were left unfettered, they could infect the whole church. However, Paul is confident God will keep the Galatians from believing their erroneous claims. Those trying to confuse them will have to contend with God's judgment for their behavior.

Verse 11 reveals the false teachers were lying by telling the people that Paul had preached that circumcision was necessary to salvation. Paul asks why he is still persecuted by Pharisees at the synagogues (2 Corinthians 11:24) and Jewish Christians who had once been Pharisees (Acts 15), if he had changed his teachings. If he had agreed with them, then the Cross of Christ would no longer be an obstacle for them (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). Stretching the metaphor in anger, Paul says he wishes that those insisting upon circumcision would castrate themselves.

3. Called to Be Free (Galatians 5:13–17)

Today's text ends with Paul again reminding the Galatians that they were called to be free and should not use their freedom as an opportunity to sin, but instead they should serve each other in love. For those still concerned with the Law, Paul writes that the whole Law is summed up in the command "Thou shalt love your neighbour as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18, KJV). Engaging in conflict would only destroy their community. Paul beseeches the Galatians to live lives led by the Holy Spirit so they will not give in to their sinful nature. He explains that the desires of the flesh and the Spirit are constantly warring within believers, preventing us from doing what is right (cf. Romans 7:15–24).

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is Paul against the practice of circumcision for believers (Galatians 5:2–4, 6)?
2. How should believers use their liberty (Galatians 5:13, 16)?

Discuss the Meaning

This world believes that to get anything, you must work. It's hard to accept that salvation is free with no task required.

1. What are some ways we try to work for salvation?

2. How can you discern whether you are working for salvation or walking in the Spirit?

Liberating Lesson

Our society often feels merit-based, meaning we perform to get rewards. We perform certain duties at work to get a raise. We must meet certain requirements to get A's in school. Some even make grand gestures to win the heart of someone they love. We are enslaved by our own actions. It's a foreign concept that salvation is given by grace, not acts, but this is the gift of Christ.

Application for Activation

It's a blessing to have the Holy Spirit to guide us in the right direction. In your daily devotion, before sharing your petitions, ask God to help you be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. Study scriptural accounts of those who were Spirit-led to understand the ways He speaks to us (Acts 8:26–40, 15:5–29, 16:1–15). As you learn to recognize the urging of the Spirit, commit to following His guidance, even if it means you will be traveling outside of your comfort zone. It will be worth it.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Say It Correctly

Entangled. in-TANG-ild.
Leaveneth. LE-vin-ith.

Daily Bible Readings

DAY 260

Luke 13:1–35
Psalm 106:1–5

DAY 261

Luke 14:1–35
Psalm 106:6–15

DAY 262

Luke 15:1–32
Psalm 106:16–27

DAY 263

Luke 16:1–31
Psalm 106:28–33

DAY 264

Luke 17:1–37
Psalm 106:34–46

DAY 265

Luke 18:1–43
Psalm 106:47–48

DAY 266

Luke 19:1–48
Psalm 107:1–8

Notes