

Galatians

Unbound, Unchained, Unbroken

Week 10 | Galatians 5:1–12

Lisa Scheffler, author

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I recently watched a “true crime” documentary that told the story of a robbery that ended in murder. Several people who were implicated in these crimes were interviewed for the film. One of the co-conspirators stood out to me. Although all signs pointed to his very limited involvement (he’d been duped by the others and was not involved in the violence), he didn’t want to plead his case in court. In fact, he readily confessed and was anxious to go back to prison.

This man had been in and out of trouble most of his life. He admitted to preferring prison life to life on the “outside.” He appreciated that he always had enough to eat and a place to sleep. But more importantly, he liked that his days were planned out for him and he didn’t have to make many decisions. The rules were clear. He had decided that freedom was a burden he really didn’t want. For him, imprisonment was more desirable than living as a free man.

Does this attitude surprise you? I’m not sure it would have surprised the Apostle Paul. It’s possible he saw something like it in the Galatian Christians.

Day 1

Since we paused for Mother’s Day, let’s take a moment to review the situation that Paul was confronting in the Galatian church.

See how well can you answer these questions. (If you need a reminder, or are just joining our study, read the verses listed.)

- Why did Paul write this letter? What had been going on in the Galatian house churches that had him so concerned? (See [Galatians 1:6–9](#) and [3:1–3](#).)
- What role did the Jewish law, and particularly circumcision, play in this controversy? How did Paul and Peter end up in conflict over this issue? (See [Galatians 2:7–8](#), [Galatians 2:11–14](#).)

So far, Paul has used his own testimony (1:10–2:21) and theological arguments (chapters 3–4) to persuade the Galatian Christians that the voices they’ve been listening to have been leading them astray. In this final section (5:1–6:10), Paul applies his message directly to the situation these churches were facing. By understanding his message to them, we can better understand how the Spirit would have us apply it to ourselves.

In our passage this week Paul issues a blunt declaration. With his arguments from chapter 4 as a platform, he dives headfirst into the issue afflicting the Galatian churches — circumcision. As you read our passage for the week, notice how Paul frames his discussion. Why does he oppose circumcision? Also notice what, according to Paul, has value in God’s eyes.

Read

Galatians 5:1–12 (NIV)

***5** It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ⁸ That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” ¹⁰ I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. ¹¹ Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. ¹² As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

- Why is Paul angry at his opponents and frustrated with the Galatians? What truth does he want them to see and obey?

Respond

Those who are in Christ, Paul argues, are free from requirements of the law, including the rite that marked entrance into the old covenant, circumcision. For a Jewish person in Paul’s day, following the law affected everything you did. Adhering to its regulations set you apart from your Gentile neighbors and defined your community. Even Jewish Christians who were loyal to Jesus found it difficult to understand how life without the law was possible. Wasn’t the law

God's will? What would govern their choices and determine their lifestyle? This will be something Paul explains in the rest of his letter. But first, he will deal directly with the issue of circumcision and once again confront those who are promoting it.

Only by faith in Christ can you be made right with God. There is no "both/and" in this situation. You cannot put your faith in the law and in Christ. What's more, why would you want to? Christ has set us free! Why would you want to go back to prison?

We aren't made right with through law-keeping, but by Christ's sacrifice on the cross and victory over sin and death. "Following the rules" will never be the source of our righteousness before God. It doesn't matter if you're trying to keep the Mosaic law, or some other code of conduct, your ability to be a rule-keeper is not what makes you free. As we delve into Galatians 5 this week, let's consider what does make us free, and how we should use that freedom.

Day 2

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One time, when my daughter was an adorable preschooler with a not-so-adorable temper, she threatened to call Social Security on me. She was angry because I wouldn't let her do something that, in her young mind, was essential to her happiness and well-being. She decided it was time to bring out the big guns. With her hands on her hips and fury in her eyes, she announced, "I'm calling Social Security!"

It doesn't matter whether we are four or seventy-four, we will sometimes balk at being told what to do, even if it's for our own good. We'll lash out if it feels like our freedom is being taken away. From the Garden of Eden to today, people want to go their own way, chart their own course, forge their own destiny — apart from God. That's what freedom means to them. But what we're discovering here in Galatians is that true freedom can only come from a life *with* God.

The concept of freedom is key to Galatians. We won't grasp the full meaning of this final section of Paul's letter without it, so it's important that we get it right. It's not the way rebellious four year-olds (or seventy-four year-olds) would define freedom.

We're only covering one verse today, because it's an important one.

Read

Galatians 5:1

5 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Reflect

Gordon Fee calls Galatians 5:1 a “[Janus](#)” statement. Like the mythological god with two faces, this sentence directs us backwards to Paul’s previous theological argument and forwards to the implications of all he’s been saying. Recall that in chapter 4:21–31, Paul had used the story of Hagar and Sarah to contrast two ways of being: either as the children of slavery or the children of promise. Now, as he is transitioning to the implications of that lineage.

The first part of verse 1 that the NIV translates “it is for freedom that Christ has set us free” is only four words in the Greek: (in order) “freedom” “you” “Christ” “(set) free.” Paul is using simple, direct language to emphasize that these people were finally free. According to commentator Scot McKnight, “Everything we understand in this passage, and ultimately everything we ‘take home’ from Galatians, hinges on our ability to perceive what the term *freedom* means in this letter.”¹

Most importantly, “being free” is inextricably tied to *relationship with God*. It is what we were created for, and we cannot experience freedom apart from the relationship we have with God, by the Spirit and through Christ. Being free means being liberated from our slavery to the law and to sin so we can become the people God created us to be. That’s true freedom!

As McKnight explains, “being free” is first of all, the *result of the death of Jesus Christ*. Christ’s death redeemed us from the curse of the law (Galatians 2:4 and 3:13). Also, “being free” is “*life in the Spirit of God*.” As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” These ideas are put together later by Paul in Romans 8:2: “through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death.”² “In general,” McKnight concludes, “we might say that ‘being free’ is the liberation of a person’s spirit to do what God wants, to be what God wants, and to enjoy the life God gives us on this earth.”³

Contrary to the freedom defined by rebellious humans everywhere, freedom *from* is at the same time a freedom *to*. While we are not free to do whatever we want, we are free to live according to the love and goodness of our Father. We are free to choose peace over selfish striving, kindness over disregard, and justice over exploitation. We are set free to do what is right and to be who God designed us to be.

To embrace this concept of freedom, we must stand our ground. As Paul warns, “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Living free takes effort. It will require us to submit ourselves to the Spirit and die to selfish desires. But putting ourselves back in the shackles of the law or of sin is endless slavery and subjugation. It is a life outside the goodness of God and the reign of King Jesus, and that’s really no life at all.

¹ Scot McKnight, [Galatians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 244.

² McKnight, 244.

³ McKnight, 245.

Respond

Is the freedom Paul is talking about in Galatians the way you are used to thinking about freedom? Why or why not?

Meditate on the first part of Galatians 5:1, “*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*” What about your freedom in Christ causes you to rejoice? Spend some time praising the Father.

Day 3

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A caged bird can't fly, a chained elephant can't roam, and a cheetah in a pen can't run. No matter the reasons for restraining them, the simple fact is that these animals can't act according to their God-given design when they are confined or restricted.

According to Paul, humanity has been in slavery to two forces, the law and sin. We've been caged, chained, and fenced in. Jesus Christ redeemed us in full! In Christ, we've been set free. As we discovered yesterday, this freedom is directly tied to our relationship with God. It is only in Christ and by the Spirit that we become free to live according to God's good design. “In short, for Paul ‘freedom’ is near the very heart of the gospel: God sets us free through Christ and in the Spirit, so that we can love God and others.”⁴

With Galatians 5:1 as his thesis statement, in the passage we'll look at today, Paul speaks directly to what's been going on in the Galatian churches with several blunt statements. Imagine you're sitting in one of the house churches when this letter is being read. How would these verses strike you?

Read

Galatians 5:2–6

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor

⁴ McKnight, 246.

uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

- What issue is Paul's primary concern in this passage? Why?
- What do you imagine the reaction of Paul's audience was?

Reflect

In order to understand why circumcision was causing such controversy in the Galatian churches, we need to remember what it represents. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham and all his descendants. It became like an "entrance requirement" into the covenant that you received either as an infant, or as an adult convert, because it was the first step in following the entire law. What's more, it marked you as one of God's people. You wouldn't be accepted in the covenant community without it.

Paul saw the embrace of circumcision and all it represented as alienation from Christ. After all, why would Jesus have come to die if the law alone could justify you (make you right with God)? Membership in God's covenant and acceptance into his family came through Christ. To say it could be attained by some other means was a rejection of God's grace.

If you add anything to grace, you're no longer experiencing grace. You've "fallen away" from it. It's like paying someone for a heartfelt gift that they picked out just for you and bought with their hard-earned money. If you attempt to do such an insulting thing, you are turning a loving gift into an impersonal transaction.

According to commentator Gordon Fee, if the Galatians "were to yield to circumcision under pressure, they would in effect be saying that Christ's death and resurrection are not sufficient for one to be in a right relationship with God. And this is what Paul recognizes clearly: it is either Christ + nothing or they miss out on Christ altogether."⁵

Paul has clearly spelled out the negatives of circumcision, and now offers an alternative. Paul unites three key terms Spirit, faith, and righteousness in two beautiful, but tightly packed sentences.

The first statement points us towards the future. As N.T. Wright says, "Paul speaks of the time when God will declare publicly and completely that all those in Christ really are his people. This is 'the hope of righteousness', the longing for the time when God's vindication and justification of all his faithful people will be made manifest."⁶

⁵ Gordon Fee, *Galatians*, (Dorset, UK: Deo Publishing, 2011), 189.

⁶ Tom Wright, [*Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 62–63.

Our faith is our response to the work of Christ, whose death and resurrection secures our place before God and eliminates any form of law-keeping as a means of gaining God's acceptance. But it is not a hollow faith, where you simply acknowledge a certain set of beliefs.

Ours is a faith that works — but not through the works of the law. It is faith that works through love — a love that is open to all. God's children are to love as he loves, sacrificially, unconditionally, and in the relentless pursuit of another's good.

Respond

Are you resting in God's grace? Do you think you try to add anything to it? What's the problem with doing so?

How does your faith prompt you to love God and others? Spend some time in prayer and ask the Father how you might better love as Jesus loves.

Day 4

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In Galatians, Paul answers two big questions that people still ask today: 1) How is someone accepted into God's family? 2) How then do they live? We've seen him insist over and over that it is by faith in Jesus Christ that a person becomes a child of God. Nothing else is needed. In this final part of Galatians, we're going to consider what this means for how we live.

The Galatian Christians had been misled by Paul's opponents. Gentiles don't need to covert to Judaism by following the law before they can find their seat at God's table. When a person, Jew or Gentile, turns to Jesus Christ, they come out from under the law and live under the dominion of Christ and the Spirit.⁷

Once again we see a frustrated Paul speaking against his opponents in unyielding terms. Notice the different metaphors, or deep comparisons, that Paul uses in this section.

Read

Galatians 5:7–12

⁷ McKnight, 242–243.

⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ⁸ That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” ¹⁰ I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. ¹¹ Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. ¹² As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

- What metaphors did you find?
- Do you find Paul’s tone shocking in this section? Why or why not?

Reflect

In this section, Paul’s frustration has him jumping around a bit. First, he begins by addressing the Galatians using the metaphor of a race. I’m not much of a NASCAR fan, but every once in a while I see a clip showing a huge pile up on the track. Sometimes the cause of the crash is one car clipping another one as it tries to cut in front and take the lead.

Of course, Paul knew nothing of race cars, but I can imagine him envisioning one runner cutting in on another and running them off course. That’s what he believes his opponents did. They persuaded, cajoled, and even coerced the Galatians off course.

Paul then switches to a metaphor that describes his opponents. This is a metaphor that Paul also uses elsewhere to describe the pervasive influence of something that might seem small, even insignificant. Here he’s describing the massive effect even a small number of agitators can have. Yet Paul displays confidence that the Galatians will stick with him and his opponents will “pay the penalty” for causing such discord and confusion.

Finally, Paul makes one last personal appeal. Apparently his opponents accused him of being a hypocrite for suggesting circumcision in some cases, but forbidding it in others. If that were the case, Paul wonders, why would he be experiencing persecution?

According to Fee, Paul’s opponents may be referencing an incident described in Acts 16:1–3 where Paul had Timothy circumcised as to not offend the Jewish community in Derbe and Lystra, cities in the region of Galatia. Yet Paul already gave an explanation for why this is not an example of hypocrisy back in 5:6. “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*”

Paul’s view of freedom as explained in 1 Corinthians 2:19–23 helps us understand Paul’s actions.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I

became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

Fee explains, “This is precisely the kind of freedom in Christ that those who live by the law simply find intolerable; and their way to fight it is to argue for ‘inconsistency’ on the part of the apostle. But Paul’s consistency is to be found in his very gospel-oriented view of life, in which the law...has been replaced by God’s own empowering presence, the Holy Spirit himself.”⁸

Respond

Wright explains, “Wherever Paul goes he is attacked by those Jews who think he is letting his side down, who cannot bear his message of a crucified Messiah. As always in this letter, the cross is at the heart of Paul’s gospel, and Paul knows it is always a ‘scandal’ (the word means ‘something people trip over’). Of course it is: it demolishes the boast of those Jews who suppose themselves superior to the rest of humanity simply because of their ancestry.”⁹

In what ways are we tempted in the church to view ourselves as superior? How does the message of the cross correct and humble us before God? As we deal with any who oppose us? As we strive to better love and help the people in our life find and follow Christ?

Day 5

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Happy Friday!

Let’s reflect on what we’ve learned this week, invite the Spirit to transform us and commit to living out his guidance.

Reflect

Take another look at [Galatians 5:1–12](#).

- What are Paul’s main points in this passage? How has it helped you better understand your freedom in Christ? What does faith expressing itself through love mean to you? How does that differ from a reliance on rule-keeping?

⁸ Fee, 196.

⁹ Wright, 66.

- What has stayed with you personally as you've studied this passage?

Connect

If you live long enough as a Christian, you'll probably notice how the church-at-large will swing in focus, particularly when one generation folds into the next. The spotlight of concern will shine more brightly on certain behaviors and leave others in the dark. The young will inevitably critique the "the way we've always done it." Across the wide spectrum of believers, one group will claim Christian freedom in one area, but tighten up in others. Another group might do the opposite. The socially and culturally constructed understanding of what a "good Christian" looks like often shifts depending on time, place, and circumstances.

The "gray" areas that exist between what is clearly forbidden by the Bible and what is clearly permissible will morph and change shape. In many denominations in the not-too-distant past, drinking alcohol would have put your church membership at risk. Now, although experiences vary, it probably wouldn't be a scandal to see a fellow church-goer out at a restaurant with a glass of wine in their hand. Sometimes the differences are less generational and more cultural. There are Christians who would proudly show off their gun collection while for others, "Christian gun owner" is an oxymoron.

It's so often in the "gray" that Christians fight and squabble. We judge and ostracize and decide that our "rules" are better than their "rules," so we are the truly righteous ones. We might consider that we like black and white rules that abolish the gray because they don't require us to trust God and rely on the Spirit. Even if they are manmade, these rules can feel more comfortable than freedom in Christ.

We would do well to remember Paul's insistence that "*in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*" Paul isn't celebrating the uncircumcised at the expense of the circumcised, or vice versa, because neither state ushers you into the presence of God. Faith in Jesus is what brings us into God's family and creates the family resemblance that makes us recognizable to the world.

The Spirit empowers us to express our faith in relentless, sacrificial love. As a church, and as individuals we can pursue the good of others. We can share the love of Christ in tangible ways. And what about those "gray areas"? In navigating those spaces, wisdom is key, and only the Spirit can help us walk through this life in a way that honors the unbelievable grace of God and demonstrates the self-giving love of Jesus. When we love one another and share in meaningful conversations where the Spirit is present, we can find unity in Christ, even when we disagree, because we recognize that our faith is not expressed in "being right," but in love.

Respond

Back in Galatians 2:20, Paul gave us a beautiful picture of "faith working through love," and it's Jesus and our response to him. Reflect on this verse as you pray over how God would have your respond to his Word. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ

lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Now slow down, pray over these prompts, and ask the Spirit to direct you.

Ask the Father:

- What do you want me to take away from what I’ve studied this week? What do you want me to remember and keep present with me?
- What do you want me to do with the truth of your Word? What is the one, next, right step that you want me to take?
- What are you teaching me about you? About who you are and the relationship I have with you? How can I worship and love you based on what you’ve revealed?

Pray about ways that your faith can work through love this week. Who can you share your ideas with? Have a meaningful conversation this week about freedom, faith, the Spirit, and love.

Next week

At last! The Holy Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit make their appearance next week! Can’t wait to study them with you.