

## May 22 Lesson 12 (NIV)

### FREEDOM, LOVE, AND FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Galatians 5:1-15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Galatians 5:1-15

#### Galatians 5:1-15

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

<sup>7</sup> You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup> That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. <sup>9</sup> “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

<sup>13</sup> You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. <sup>14</sup> For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup> If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

#### KEY TEXT

*The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”—Galatians 5:14*

### God Frees and Redeems

## Unit 3: Liberating Letters

LESSONS 9–13

### LESSON OUTLINE

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- I. Fight for Freedom (Galatians 5:1)
  - A. Accomplished by Christ (v. 1a)
  - B. Abandoning the Yoke (v. 1b)
- II. Searching for Freedom (Galatians 5:2–6)
  - A. Looking to Law (vv. 2–4)  
*Fully Binding Agreements*
  - B. Looking to Love (vv. 5–6)
- III. Obstacles to Freedom (Galatians 5:7–12)
  - A. Persuasion (vv. 7–10)
  - B. Persecution (vv. 11–12)  
*Offensive!*
- IV. Paradox of Freedom (Galatians 5:13–15)
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  - B. Fulfilling the Law (vv. 14–15)

#### Conclusion

- A. They Will Know Us by Our Love
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

### HOW TO SAY IT

amanuensisuh-man-yoo-en-sis.

HagarHay-gar.

JudaizersJoo-duh-ize-ers.

### Introduction

#### A. Spiritual Parenting

Teaching a child to seek good for others remains a difficult part of parenting. A child's behavior highlights the intrinsic selfish nature of humanity. A child may fight over toys, demand

the last cookie, or balk at household chores. Parenting involves more than telling scriptural truths; it also involves modeling ethical behavior for children.

Yet even mature adults have trouble overcoming selfish practices. Adults are often no better than children regarding love for others. The churches in Galatia were wrestling with the tension of personal freedom and what was required of them as God's children. Divisions had been formed; Paul, like an attentive father, offered a new perspective on the nature of law, liberty, and love.

## B. Lesson Context

Today's Scripture text marks a transition in Paul's teaching to the Galatian Christians. To this point, Paul defended the nature of his ministry (Galatians 1:9–11) and offered a new understanding on the nature of the law (3:21–22), especially for God's children (3:26–29).

Among the Galatians were individuals who required Gentile believers' adherence to Jewish religious customs and practices. Paul called out these Judaizers for compelling "Gentiles to follow Jewish customs" (Galatians 2:14). Judaizers emphasized faithfulness to the old covenant—the Law of Moses—for salvation. They taught that Gentiles should show faithfulness to the works of the law to find salvation (1:6; see Acts 15:1–5). The most visible way such faithfulness could be shown was by the act of circumcision (see Genesis 17:7–14). What resulted among the Galatians was a tension between the works of the law and expressions of faith (Galatians 3:1–14).

Prior to today's Scripture text, Paul refers to the story of Abraham's wives, Hagar and Sarah (Galatians 4:21–23; see Genesis 16:15; 17:16–21; 21:2). Paul retells the birth narratives of Isaac (by Sarah) and Ishmael (by Hagar). One might assume that Paul would connect the physical descendants of Isaac and Ishmael to that of Jews and non-Jews, respectively. However, Paul relates the spiritual descendants of Isaac to individuals in freedom from the old covenant, children of God's promises (Galatians 4:28). By contrast, Paul describes the spiritual descendants of Ishmael as those in bondage to the old covenant, never to experience the inheritance of God's children (4:30). The retelling made Paul's point clear: through faith, not law adherence, is God's blessing inherited.

## I. Fight for Freedom

### (GALATIANS 5:1)

#### A. Accomplished by Christ (v. 1a)

1a. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then,

Paul's previous discussion—concerning freedom and inheritance (Galatians 4:21–31)—has come to its fulfillment. Paul reminded his audience to *stand firm* in light of that *freedom*. Paul's retelling of the story of Sarah and Hagar served to show that individuals who express faith in Christ—whether they be Jew or Gentile—live in freedom (4:31; see Lesson Context).

Freedom in this regard was the result of a believer's life made new in *Christ*. But freedom is not without cost. That Christ *has set* believers *free* indicated the cost: He "gave himself" for humanity's sins (Galatians 1:4; 2:20), "becoming a curse for us" as he hung on the cross (3:13; see Acts 5:30–31).

## B. Abandoning the Yoke (v. 1b)

### 1b. and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Throughout the letter, Paul emphasized the limitations of the Law of Moses as it related to the children of God (Galatians 2:16–20; 3:10–14, 19–26). Paul’s directive to avoid becoming *burdened again* in this regard was due to the teachings of the Judaizers (see Lesson Context).

That Paul described the law as a *yoke* highlighted the law’s demands, especially those placed on Galatian Gentiles (Acts 15:10). A yoke indicated the submission of a weaker power to a stronger power (see Genesis 27:40; Leviticus 26:13; Isaiah 9:4; 1 Timothy 6:1).

God desired that his people live freely (Colossians 2:16–23), following Jesus’ reminder that “my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). Believers are to be burdened by the needs of others (see Galatians 6:2).

## II. Searching for Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:2–6)

### A. Looking to Law (vv. 2–4)

#### 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.

In at least one other letter, Paul dictated the letter’s contents to an amanuensis. This individual wrote down Paul’s dictated words (see Romans 16:22). It is unknown whether the letter to the Galatians was composed in the same manner (compare Galatians 6:11). If it was, we can imagine *Paul* taking over the pen or quill in an effort to stress the importance of the point at hand. The Galatians might have noticed a change of handwriting when they read *mark my words! I ... tell you*.

The present tense of *if you let yourselves* indicated that some Galatians had not yet been *circumcised*, but they were considering it because of the Judaizers’ influence. To that end, Paul warned that their outward practices—circumcision and uncircumcision—were considered nothing of *value* (see 1 Corinthians 7:18–19). Neither practice automatically allowed a person to experience God’s promises (see Galatians 3:26–29; 4:28).

When a person depended on the works of the law—including circumcision—for their salvation, that act served to “set aside the grace of God” (Galatians 2:21). Paul desired that a person show faith in *Christ*, not righteousness by the law. If the Galatians accepted the requirements of circumcision as mandatory for salvation, Christ’s work in freeing people from the curse of the law, sin, and death would provide them no value.

While Paul warned of circumcision to the Galatians, elsewhere he asked Timothy to undergo the practice (Acts 16:1–3). Because of Timothy’s Jewish heritage, Paul wanted to remove all possible distractions to their proclamation of the gospel message. (See Galatians 2:1–3 for an example of the opposite scenario.)

#### 3. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

If the Galatian believers were to *be circumcised*, then they would be required to follow the entirety of the Law of Moses. It was not as though they could pick and choose which parts of the law to observe. They would become like a debtor, giving their life to *the whole law*. Obedience to the law was an all-or-nothing requirement! If people disobeyed the law at one point, they were guilty of disobeying the whole law (Romans 2:25).

**4. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.**

Paul reiterates a previous point: A person cannot *be justified* by both *Christ* and *the law* (see Galatians 5:2–4). Only faith can bring justification (Romans 3:28).

The phrase *fallen away from grace* served as a warning: the Galatians' acceptance as children of God was entirely dependent on God's grace. Any attempts to find justification in the law would be equivalent to falling out of grace's realm.

## B. Looking to Love (vv. 5–6)

**5. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.**

The identifier *we* introduces a direct contrast to the “you ... fallen away from grace” of the previous verse. Paul included himself among those who based their *hope* on justification apart from the law. Their hope was instead based on *faith* and *the Spirit*.

The concept of justification refers to believers being declared righteous before God as their sins are forgiven. The concept has roots in the judicial system—as a judge might declare a person righteous or condemned (see Deuteronomy 25:1). Some people argued that justification could only come through following the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1–5).

However, Paul opposed that perspective (Acts 13:38–39; Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16). Instead, he taught that *righteousness*—for both Jew and Gentile—was attained only through faith in Christ (Romans 3:30; 5:1; compare John 14:6). By a person's faith, God would declare them righteous (Romans 4:5; Philippians 3:8–9).

While justification is a one-time occurrence, believers have hope that the Holy Spirit will transform and sanctify (Romans 12:1–2; 1 Timothy 1:7–11; Titus 3:5). This transformation begins when a believer is justified (1 Corinthians 6:11) and progresses until the end of their life (see Ephesians 4:22–24; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 10:14).

**6. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.**

Because Paul had already expressed the failures of *circumcision*, some Galatians might have highlighted their own *uncircumcision*. Paul reminded them that *neither ... has any value* regarding God's righteousness. By highlighting the limitations of both, Paul reinforced that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile ... you are all one in Christ Jesus” (see lesson 11 on Galatians 3:28; compare Galatians 6:15).

Instead, what counted was a person's faith in *Christ Jesus* (see Galatians 2:16; 3:11–12, 23–25). This *faith* is not passive; it is not mere believing or hoping. Instead, faith has an active component, *expressing itself* in the lives of believers.

This outward expression is demonstrated *through love*—a love rooted in God’s love (1 John 4:19). The element of love highlights faith’s superiority over the law. Love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8, 10; see Matthew 22:38–40). And as a result, it was the crux of the law (see commentary on Galatians 5:14, below).

### III. Obstacles to Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:7–12)

#### A. Persuasion (vv. 7–10)

**7. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?**

The metaphor of *running* a race is common in Paul’s writings (see 1 Corinthians 9:24–25; Philippians 2:16). It described the Galatians’ pursuit of Paul’s teaching (see Galatians 1:11; 2:2). They had started the *race* well; they had followed what he taught! But Judaizers, teaching a different message, obstructed the Galatians’ obedience. That Paul asked *who cut in on you* was likely a rhetorical question; he knew their situation. He wanted them to recognize the problem in their midst (compare 3:1).

**8. That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.**

Paul called the *persuasion* of the Galatian Judaizers “a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6), which would “pervert the gospel of Christ” (1:7). Their message distracted other Galatians from following the gospel that *calls* to faith, obedience, and love.

**9. “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”**

This verse could be a part an ancient proverb familiar to many of Paul’s audiences (compare 1 Corinthians 5:6). The proverb described the effect *a little yeast* would have on *the whole batch of dough*. The New Testament uses the word *yeast* figuratively elsewhere (example: Matthew 16:6–12). To Paul, the teachings of another “gospel” served as leaven among the Galatian believers. As they allowed a little of opposing persuasive teaching to take hold, specifically the alleged need for circumcision, the rest of the false teachings would take hold. The result would be division among the Galatians.

**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.**

Against the influence of the other teachings, Paul was *confident* in the Galatians’ mindset toward faith. The resulting positive reinforcement served to motivate the Galatians, like a parent encouraging a child. Paul hoped they would not *take* another *view* of the gospel of Christ Jesus. The individual teacher (*the one ... throwing you into confusion*) who taught a different gospel than Paul’s would face God’s judgment and *pay the penalty* (Galatians 1:8–9).

#### B. Persecution (vv. 11–12)

**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.**

Without further contextual clues, we are left to assume that the Judaizers claimed Paul had continued *preaching circumcision*. Perhaps their claims were based on Paul's former zeal in Judaism (Galatians 1:13–17), or his seemingly casual approach toward the issue (see 5:6).

Before his conversion, Paul had *persecuted* followers of Christ (see Acts 9:4–5; 22:4; 26:11; 1 Corinthians 15:9; etc.). However, Paul was now the one to suffer the hardships he caused others to experience (compare 2 Corinthians 11:24–27).

This is not the only time when Paul wrote on *the offence of the cross*. For messianic expectations, a crucified Messiah was “a stumbling block” (1 Corinthians 1:23). To the Judaizers, salvation without the merit of the law was equally as offensive.

**12. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!**

The crescendo of Paul's defense hit an unexpected (and graphic) climax. Regarding the teacher(s) who had been pushing for circumcision, Paul wished they would *emasculate themselves*. While this could mean Paul wished their teaching would be cut off, more likely he was referring to a literal cutting off part of one's body! Pagan sects and empires of antiquity sometimes required emasculation, or castration, of certain followers or captives (see 2 Kings 20:18; Matthew 19:12; Acts 8:27). Paul seems to say sarcastically that if the Judaizers are so impressed with circumcision, then they should go even further (see also Philippians 3:2–4).

## IV. Paradox of Freedom

(GALATIANS 5:13–15)

### A. Denying the Flesh (v. 13)

**13a. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.**

Paul's Galatian *brothers and sisters*—believers who expressed faith—*were called* from the yoke of the law's demands. They were henceforth to live into the freedom that Christ had given. The Lord had worked in the Galatians, and the time had come for them to move forward in his Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:17)!

**13b. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.**

But Paul extended a caution. The word *flesh* describes human nature that acts in sinful ways contrary to God's Spirit (Romans 8:1–12; Galatians 6:8; Ephesians 2:3). *Freedom* is not an occasion for believers to *indulge* their personal desires, especially sinful ones. In short, liberty does not mean license.

Christian freedom requires outward-facing action, dealing with a believer's treatment of other people. The remedy for living under the flesh is to *serve* others in *love*. As the Spirit brings freedom, a believer is required to use that freedom responsibly, concerned for the good of others (see Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:7).

If Paul had desired an example of this teaching, he could have referred to the life and ministry of Jesus (see Mark 10:45; John 13:4–16, 34–35; Philippians 2:3–8). Further, Paul's own life and ministry was an application of this verse (see 1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

## B. Fulfilling the Law (vv. 14–15)

**14. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

Paul was likely referring to the *law* of Moses and all that it required. The law’s teachings did not culminate in customs and rituals like circumcision. Instead, the law was *fulfilled* and found complete through a person’s overt concern for others (Romans 13:10).

Paul continued in the tradition of Jesus’ ethical teaching, reminding believers of the importance of *love for neighbor* (see Matthew 22:36–40; Luke 10:25–28). Both Jesus and Paul expanded on the law’s teaching, applying it broadly (see Leviticus 19:18). God is most loved when his children show love toward others (compare Romans 13:8; 1 John 4:19–21).

**15. If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.**

A tense conflict might lead a person to say or act in a manner that serves to *bite and devour* other people, like the actions of a predator toward a weaker animal. If believers are not filled with love (see Galatians 5:14, above), their actions may tear others down.

If the Galatians attacked one another, the result would be mutually assured destruction. They would be *destroyed* by fleshly desires.

## Conclusion

### A. They Will Know Us by Our Love

As Peter Scholtes (1938–2009) directed his South Side Chicago youth choir in the 1960s, he wanted a song that would unite the varied experiences of his church’s youth group. After a day of work, Scholtes composed “They’ll Know We Are Christians.” The song, now made popular in numerous hymnals, reflected the sentiment of Jesus’ teaching that “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

While believers might be free from the demands of the law, Paul taught the Galatians that such freedom requires active love for others. Showing this love is the litmus test for a believer’s love for God. Self-examination regarding love is prudent for followers of Jesus. Does anything prevent or distract from your expression of love to God and others? Might your own definition of freedom stand in the way of love?

### B. Prayer

Our Father, thank you for the freedom you have given us because of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us use that freedom to express neighborly love to all people that we encounter. Focus our hearts to love as you have loved us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Christian liberty always seeks the good of others.<sup>1</sup>

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