

Set Free in Christ



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 2

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 5:1–15; 1 Corinthians 6:20; Romans 8:1; Hebrews 2:14, 15.

MEMORY VERSE: “My brothers and sisters, you were chosen to be free. But [do not] use your freedom as an excuse to live under the power of sin. Instead, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13, NIV).



Paul warns against the danger of trying to earn God's approval by obeying the law. And he warns against the danger of believing that being saved frees one to fall into sin.

IN GALATIANS 2:4, Paul spends a short time talking about the importance of protecting the “freedom” we have in Christ Jesus. Paul speaks about freedom so often. But what does he mean? What does this freedom include? How far does this freedom go? Does it have any limits? And what connection is there between freedom and Christ and the law?

Paul answers these questions by warning the Galatians of two dangers: (1) The first danger is trying to earn God's approval and love through obeying the law. Paul's attackers in Galatia are so caught up in earning God's approval. They forget the salvation they already have in Christ. They forget how Christ set them free. (2) The second danger Paul warns the Galatians about is not to fall into sin. Falling into sin would abuse the freedom Christ purchased for them. Some believed that being saved freed one to sin. They believed that true spiritual freedom and the law were against each other. But they were mistaken.

These two dangers are very real for Christians today, as well. They make slaves of believers again. Paul begs the Galatians to stand strong in the true freedom that comes from Christ. This freedom is Christ's gift to His church.

CHRIST SETS US FREE (Galatians 1:3, 4)

Paul commands the Galatians not to surrender their freedom in Christ. He talks to them as a military leader would speak to his doubtful troops. The power and force of Paul's words make them seem to jump off the page! That force tells us Paul wants his words in Galatians 5:1 to stand out in the way a giant billboard or large sign does. Being made free is what Paul's whole argument is about. And the Galatians are in danger of giving that freedom away.

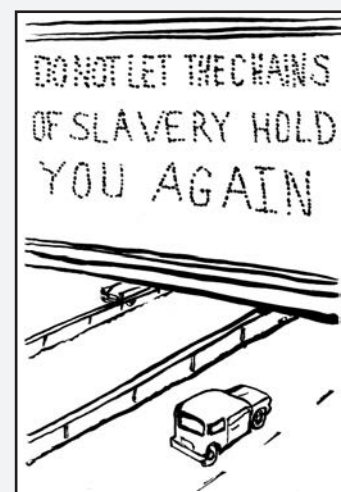
Read Galatians 1:3, 4; Galatians 2:16; and Galatians 3:13. What are some of the word pictures Paul uses in these verses? And how do they help explain what Christ has done for us?

Notice Paul's words in Galatians 5:1: "Christ has set us free to enjoy our freedom" (NIV). These words seem to hint at one of the word pictures Paul has in mind. This verse uses a lot of the same language found in the special set of words used in Bible times to free slaves. Slaves had no legal rights. It was believed a god could buy their freedom. Then the slaves would be free. But really, the slaves belonged to the god.

Yet, in the real world, the god did not provide money to set the slaves free. Instead, slaves paid money to the temple for their freedom. Look at the wording of a bill of sale for a slave found at the temple of Apollo, around 201 B.C. to A.D. 100: "Apollo the sun god bought a female slave from Sosibus of Amphissa. Her name is Nicaea. . . . But Nicaea has bought her freedom from Apollo."—Adapted, Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), page 340.

In some ways, this bill of sale uses the same wording as Paul does in Galatians 5:1. But there is one main difference. In Paul's word picture, God buys the slave's freedom. We do not provide the money for our freedom ourselves (1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 7:23). The price costs too much for us to pay. So, Jesus did for us what we could not do. He paid the debt for our sins. Then He freed us from the punishment that came with that debt.

Do you ever think you could save yourself? What should your answer tell you about how thankful you should be for what we have been given in Jesus?



Paul wanted his words in Galatians 5:1 to stand out the way a giant billboard or large sign does.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FREE IN CHRIST (Romans 6:14, 18)

Paul commands the Galatians to stand strong in their freedom. Paul also shares an important fact right before this command. He says, Christ has “set us free” (Galatians 1:4, NIV). That fact is the reason Christians should stand strong in their freedom. So this truth means that our freedom is a result of what Christ already has done for us.

Paul often makes a statement of fact. Then he follows that fact with a request for his readers to do something. Paul follows this same pattern in a lot of his letters (1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 10:13, 14; Colossians 2:6). For example, look at Romans 6. In this chapter, Paul makes several statements of fact about what it means to be in Christ. He says, “What we used to be was nailed to the cross with him” (Romans 6:6, NIV). Then Paul uses this fact as the reason for asking the Roman believers to protect themselves against sin: “So [do not] let sin rule your body” (Romans 6:12, NIV). The gospel is not about doing good things to become God’s children. Instead, we do good things because we already are God’s children.



Freedom for Paul means freedom from sin, eternal death, and the devil.

Read Romans 6:14, 18; Romans 8:1; Galatians 4:3, 8; Galatians 5:1; and Hebrews 2:14, 15. What do these verses say Christ has freed us from?

Paul uses the word “freedom” to describe the Christian life. He uses this word in this way more than any other writer in the New Testament. The word “freedom” and other forms of the word occur 28 times in Paul’s letters. But the word is found only 13 times elsewhere in the New Testament.

What does Paul mean by freedom? This freedom is not the freedom to live any way we want. No, it is a freedom that starts with our relationship to Jesus Christ. It includes freedom from sin, eternal death, and the devil.

“Outside of Jesus, our lives are lived in slavery. We are slaves to the law. We are slaves to the evil that controls the world. We are slaves to sin. We are slaves to our fallen flesh and to the devil. God sent His Son into the world to break the power of all these slaveholders.”—Adapted, Timothy George, *Galatians*, page 354.

To what things in life do you feel you are a slave? Memorize Galatians 5:1. Now ask God to make the freedom you have in Christ real in your life.

THE DANGERS OF SALVATION THROUGH WORKS (Galatians 5:2–12)

The way Paul begins Galatians 5:2–12 shows the importance of what he is about to say: “Look” (ESV); “Listen!” (NRSV); “Mark [pay attention to] my words!” (NIV); and “Here is what I, Paul, say to you” (NirV). All these different translations of Galatians 5:2 show that Paul means what he says. His use of the word “Look” is forceful. It commands his readers to give his words their full attention. He wants them to understand the danger they are in. They must understand how dangerous it is to tell the non-Jewish believers they must be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the skin at the end of the sex organ of a man or a boy is cut off. Some Jewish believers told the non-Jewish believers that they must be circumcised to be saved. Paul wants the Galatians to realize how dangerous this thinking is.

Read Galatians 5:2–12. In these verses, Paul deals with the topic of trying to earn God’s approval by being circumcised. What does Paul warn against?

Suppose someone tried to be saved by being circumcised. What would be the danger? The first danger would be that this person would need to obey the whole law.

Second, this person would be “cut off” from Christ. Suppose a person chose to be saved by works. Then that person has chosen to reject Christ. “You cannot be saved by works and saved by Christ. To receive Christ means you realize you cannot save yourself. But suppose you were circumcised as a way of being saved after you received Christ. Then that would be another way of saying you could save yourself.”—Adapted, John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1968), page 133.

The third danger of trying to be saved by being circumcised is that it prevents spiritual growth. And last, it goes against the message of the Cross. For it shows that a person thinks he can save himself. But the Cross shows us that we must depend completely on Christ to be saved.

Paul is so angry at the Galatians for saying that new believers must be circumcised to be saved. In fact, he is so angry he wishes the knife would slip and cut off their own sex organs! That is how upset he is. Paul’s strong words show just how serious he is about this problem.



The Cross shows us that we must depend completely on Christ to be saved.

SET FREE FROM SIN (Galatians 5:13)

Galatians 5:13 is an important turning point in the book of Galatians. Up until now, Paul has been concerned with believers having a correct understanding of the gospel. But now he talks about how Christians should behave.

Read Galatians 5:13. Paul wants to make sure the Galatians do not use their freedom in the wrong way. What does Paul want the Galatians not to do?

Two of Paul's teachings include (1) the freedom we have in Christ and (2) grace (Romans 3:8; Romans 6:1, 2). Grace is God's gift of mercy, forgiveness, and power over sin. Paul is aware of how easy it is for his message to be misunderstood. But the problem is not caused by Paul's gospel. The problem is how selfish people are. Without God, humans are self-indulgent. Self-indulgent people allow themselves to have too much of something. Or they do whatever they want in a way that uses more of something than is needed. So, Paul asks the followers of Jesus to avoid giving in to sin so that they might escape this trap of becoming self-indulgent. Instead, Paul wants them to "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13, NIV).

Our freedom in Christ means more than being set free from slavery to the world. It is also the "opportunity to love one's neighbor without allowing anything to stand in the way of that love. This service involves creating communities based on giving instead of getting power."—Adapted, Sam K. Williams, *Galatians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), page 145.

The Greek language that Paul uses shows that the love that causes us to serve others in this way is not human love. Paul uses the word "the" before the word "love" in the Greek. This wording shows that Paul means "the" divine love we receive only through the Spirit (Romans 5:5). The real surprise comes from learning that the word translated as "serve" is the Greek word for "to be made a slave." So, this wording shows that our freedom is not given to us so that we may be self-indulgent. Instead, we are "enslaved" in service to one another. This service is based on God's love.

How does our freedom in Christ set us free from slavery to the world? Why was our freedom given to us?



The word translated as "serve" is the Greek word for "to be made a slave." This wording shows that we are to be "enslaved" in service to one another.

OBEYING THE WHOLE LAW (Galatians 5:3)

In his letter, Paul speaks against “obey[ing] the whole law” (Galatians 5:3, NlrV). But later in that same chapter, he says the “whole law is fulfilled [its requirements are met] by obeying” one command (Galatians 5:14, NlrV). At first, these two verses may seem to disagree. But how do these verses agree with each other, instead?

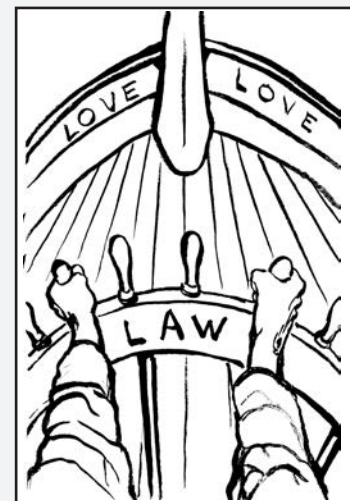
These two verses really do agree. Paul uses the wording of each verse to show the two different ways of thinking, at that time, about the relationship of Christians to the law. For example, Paul talks in a positive way about Christians who obey the law. But he never describes them as doing the law. He uses that wording to describe people who try to earn God’s approval by doing what the law commands.

Now, Paul does not mean to say that those who are saved in Christ do not obey. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul says Christians “fulfill [meet all the requirements of]” the law. He means that true Christian living is much more than just “doing” the law. Paul uses the word “fulfill” because it goes far beyond just doing. This kind of obedience begins in Jesus. (Read Matthew 5:17.) It does not mean tossing out the law. Nor does it mean reducing the law to just love. Instead, such obedience is the way the believer experiences the true meaning and purpose of the whole law.

Read Romans 13:9. According to Paul, where is the full meaning of the law found? (Read also Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31, 33; Matthew 19:19; and James 2:8.)

Paul quotes from Leviticus 19:18 in Galatians 5:13–15. His words are based on Jesus’ use of Leviticus 19:18. But Jesus was not the only Jewish teacher to claim that Leviticus 19:18 told what the whole law was about in a few words. For example, Rabbi Hillel said, “Suppose something is hateful to you. Then do not do that to your neighbor. That is the whole law.”—Adapted. But Jesus’ thinking is very different (Matthew 7:12). It is more positive. And it also shows that law and love are not opposites. Without love, the law is empty and cold. Without the law, love has nothing to guide it.

Is it easier to love others or to obey the Ten Commandments? Why? Bring your answer to class.



Without the law, love has nothing to guide it.



We must lay hold of Christ by faith.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “True faith always works by love. . . . This faith will work to make your soul pure from selfishness. We must lay hold of Christ by faith. Then our work will begin. Every person has evil and sinful habits. These must be overcome by strong battles. Every soul must fight the fight of faith. A follower of Christ cannot be dishonest in his business. He cannot be hardhearted. He cannot have a cold heart that feels no pity for others. He cannot be rude and rough in his speech. He cannot be full of pride and self-love. He cannot lord it over others. Nor can he use unkind words to criticize or put others down.

“The work of love comes from the work of faith. Bible religion means we never stop working for God or the good of others. ‘Let your light shine so others can see it. Then they will see the good things you do. And they will bring glory to your Father who is in heaven’ [Matthew 5:16, NIV]. ‘Continue to work out your own salvation. Do it with fear and trembling. God is working in you. He wants your plans and your acts to help His good purpose come true’ [Philippians 2:12, 13, NIV]. . . .

“It is true that our good works will not save us. But it is also true that faith will cause the soul connected to Christ to work for Him.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, page 1111.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① As a class, go over your answer to the last question from Thursday’s study. Which choice did people find easier? Why? What truths does your answer give to you about what it means to “fulfill [obey]” the law?
- ② Paul says faith “works” through love. What does he mean?
- ③ Why is it all too easy to use your freedom in Christ to give in to sin? Suppose someone thinks giving in to sin is OK. What trap is he or she falling into?

SUMMARY: For Paul, freedom includes what Christ has done for us and what He does in us by making us new. We must be careful that our freedom does not make us think we are free to sin or that we can save ourselves. Christ did not set us free to serve ourselves. He set us free so we might give our lives in service to people in need.