

## The Nature of Christian Freedom

Those are some cute, new planting gloves,” said Danielle, as she took survey of the gardening tools and chicken wire laid out on her friend’s deck. “What are you planting?”

“Lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, and squash,” answered Clarissa, digging around in her gardening tote bag.

“But you already have those,” Danielle said, looking out at the southeast end of Clarissa’s expansive yard. “Are you planting more?”

“Yes,” smiled Clarissa, “but at Mrs. Odessa’s house.”

“That mean old woman?” frowned Danielle.

“She’s not all bad,” offered Clarissa.

“She’s not all good, either,” Danielle rebutted. “She doesn’t even speak to people in the neighborhood.”

“I’ve been talking to her,” said Clarissa. “It has been one-sided most of the time. I did mention my garden a while back, and her eyes lit up. Then I offered to plant a small garden in her back yard, and help her tend to it.”

“Mrs. Odessa said she was a farm girl and would love to have something in her yard to do. So, wah-la!” Clarissa gestured expanding her hands over the gardening tools.

“Well, she sure doesn’t deserve your kindness,” Danielle murmured.

“I don’t deserve the love and goodness of God,” Clarissa said somberly, “but He gives it to me anyway. He tells me to love others, and thank God He empowers me to do it!”

**1.** *What different motives do people have when choosing a church to attend? Which motives more accurately reflect living from a perspective of freedom in Christ?*

**2.** *What does it mean to exercise and live a life of freedom in Christ?*

**3.** *How might we use our freedom in practical ways to live God’s way?*

## Being Set Free in Christ

*Galatians 5:1-6, KJV*

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.

*Galatians 5:1-6, NIV*

<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.

Paul began Chapter 5 with a declaration that the Messiah offered spiritual “freedom” (vs. 1) to repentant, believing sinners, with no preconditions to their redemption.

But with spiritual liberty comes personal responsibility. While the Galatians could not have set themselves free, Paul said they had the duty to resist being enslaved again. The Judaizers—those who said that Gentiles must convert to Judaism to be true believers—tried to place on the Galatians the burden of observing the law. Yet, they had to stand firm as free people, and not allow themselves to be

weighed down under legalistic burdens.

Paul tried to convince the Galatians not to accept circumcision by warning them about two negative consequences of the step. First, he assured them that if they got circumcised, Jesus would be of no use to them—if they depended on circumcision to reconcile them to the Father, they would not be depending on the Son to receive the Father’s pardon.

Second, the Galatians would be “obligated to obey the whole law” (vs. 3). The sinful person had to observe all the law perfectly. Some were seeking to get right with God by slavishly observing the law, but Paul bluntly declared that as a result, they had abandoned the “grace” of God and had denied the sufficiency of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Believers are instead justified in the presence of the Father through faith in the Son. As the Holy Spirit works in their lives, they become increasingly devoted to God. Therefore, circumcision has no effect on believers’ right standing before God—neither its presence nor absence mattered. Instead, what matters is “faith” in the Messiah demonstrating itself in genuine acts of “love” toward others (vs. 6).

**4.** *In what sense had the Galatians been misled?*

**5.** *What was the result of trying to be justified by the law?*

## Censuring for the Agitators

*Galatians 5:7-12, KJV*

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

*Galatians 5:7-12, NIV*

<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

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.

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!

Most cities in the Roman Empire had a large stadium where athletic events were held. Paul compared his readers to runners in a “race” (vs. 7), and he compared the legalists to unfair competitors who had “cut in on” the Galatians, causing them to break their runners’ stride and hindering them from heeding the “truth” of the Gospel. Verse 9 quotes a popular saying of Paul’s day—that a small amount of leaven (considered to be an evil, corrupting influence) was enough to cause an entire mass of dough to rise. False teaching, like yeast, spread and impacted everything it touched such as the believers in Galatia. But Paul was sure his readers belonged to the Lord, and God would judge those who created “confusion” (vs. 10) for the Galatians.

Apparently, the Judaizers had falsely claimed that Paul taught the necessity of circumcision, perhaps because he did not object to Jews living according to the law. Paul responded that if he had advocated circumcision for all, the Judaizers would have been supporting him rather than persecuting him. He used a sarcastic, crude statement to declare they should emasculate themselves (as pagans would do in their rituals), so they would become impotent in spreading their heretical views.

**6.** *What did Paul have in mind when he referred to the “truth” (Gal. 5:7)?*

**7.** *What accusation did Paul’s antagonists make about his preaching?*

## Serving One Another

*Galatians 5:13-15, KJV*

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.

*Galatians 5:13-15, NIV*

<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.

Though Paul told the Galatians that they didn't need to follow the practices of Judaism, he also emphasized that their Christian liberty was not a license to sin, to gratify their "flesh" (vs. 13). Instead, the Galatians were to use their freedom to minister to one another with Christlike love. The Greek verb rendered "serve" is a strong term often used for slavery. Paul urged the Galatians not to enslave themselves to the law but to become servants of one another. When Christians love and serve others, they fulfill the essence of the law. The apostle quoted Leviticus 19:18 to stress that believers are closest to pleasing God and keeping His commandments when they sacrificially reach out to others with the Savior's compassion and kindness.

Paul reminded his readers about the importance of love because they were continually harming and exploiting each other. He drew upon the image of ravenous animals attacking and devouring one another (Gal. 5:15). The result was mutual self-destruction.

**8.** *What is the purpose of Christian freedom?*

**9.** *What did Paul say was the essence of the law of Moses?*

## Pursuing the Goal

Kenneth enjoys challenges in his running, so he and his friend chose to compete in the Rugged Maniac, an obstacle course race. The air horn blasted and his group was off. Kenneth soon approached the tire obstacle, where runners would jump in and out of a long line of tires. Another runner came up from behind and pushed him aside to make a beeline through the obstacle. Landing on his wrist, Kenneth got up, pain radiating from the injury.

He rushed back to the field to dash through the mud pit and up over the bleachers. Wrist throbbing and slower runners constantly obstructing his path, he waded through three obstacles. The final obstacle, the Giant Wall, loomed. With every last bit of breath, Kenneth screamed up the wall and scaled the top. Then, with the finish line straight ahead, he encouraged his now-adjacent friend who started with him to finish strong.

In our Christian walk, we encounter opposition as we strive to become more like Christ. Unbelievers or false teachers may take unfair advantage of us, cutting in or hindering us. Like Kenneth, we face obstacles, hindrances, opposition, and a choice to pursue our goals while encouraging our co-runners and serving them.

Jesus purchased our freedom from sin and the law through His death on the Cross. We are set free in Him when we fully rely on His redemptive work for our salvation. Our expression of faith in the free gift of God's grace is apparent whenever we offer loving encouragement and service to others.

**10.** *What are some ways Christians hinder fellow believers or cause them to stray from the truth of God's grace?*

**11.** *How have you experienced freedom in Christ in your life?*

**12.** *What does it mean to be set free to serve others, not ourselves?*

## Serving in Love

Paul encouraged his readers to serve one another humbly in love. Now that they were free from bondage to the law, with its demands, they were free to focus on others. We fulfill the essence of the law and please God when we reach out to others with the same love Christ has shown us.

► *Complete these sentences. Copy them on an index card as a reminder to actively love and serve one or more specific people this week.*

• *Since Jesus has set me free from the bondage of sin, I can choose to become a servant of \_\_\_\_\_ and serve him or her by \_\_\_\_\_.*

• *Because Christ lives in me, I can set aside my desire for \_\_\_\_\_ and focus on others by \_\_\_\_\_.*

### KEY VERSE

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love they neighbour as thyself. —Galatians 5:14, KJV

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." —Galatians 5:14, NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

**Week of May 23 through May 29**

**(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)**

- Mon.** Psalm 1—The Righteous Yield Fruit.
- Tue.** John 15:1-8—Abide in Christ and Bear Fruit.
- Wed.** James 3:13-18—Wisdom's Harvest of Righteousness.
- Thu.** Isaiah 32:9-20—The Spirit Produces a Fruitful Field.
- Fri.** Matthew 7:15-20—Known by Their Fruits.
- Sat.** Ezekiel 47:1-7, 12—God's Presence Brings Fruitfulness.
- Sun.** Galatians 5:16-26—Live by the Spirit.