

# The Purpose of Freedom

## A study of Galatians 5

By Mike Morrison

**P**aul has vigorously argued that Christians are not enslaved to sin and not enslaved to law. How then do we live between these two errors?

### Circumcision a mark of slavery (verses 1-6)

Paul begins chapter 5 with a bold slogan of spiritual liberty: **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.** Christ lived, died, and was resurrected so that we might be free.

Judaizers were saying that Gentiles had to join the old covenant if they wanted God's blessings and salvation (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). In Galatians 3 and 4, Paul explains that this is false. If people submit to rules that have no authority, it would be like putting themselves into prison. In chapter 5, he exhorts them:

**Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.** Jews spoke favorably about “the yoke of the law,” as if the law would be a harness that helped them work effectively. But Paul turns that image around, saying that if the people turn to the law, the yoke would be one of slavery, and the work would do them no good.

Stand firm in your freedom, he says, and don't be bullied by threats. We need not fear the day of judgment, because we are justified on the basis of faith, not works. We will always fall short when it comes to our works, but the gospel says that Christ has already done all the work we need.

If we turn to the law again, we would be saying that Christ was not enough. **Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.** A physical procedure cannot thwart God's grace (see verse 6), but if it is done as a means of entering the old covenant, it shows that the person no longer trusts Christ to be a fully effective Savior.

Paul reminds them: **Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.** The law is not merely burdensome—it is a guarantee of failure. The person who turns to law has turned away from Christ:

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

Christ, but these two cannot be combined. If we are trying to get right with God by obeying a law, we are no longer trusting in the grace of Christ.

Paul explains the Christian way: **But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.** God's Spirit assures us that God accepts us now, and will accept us on the day of judgment, because of Christ.

It does not matter whether we are Jewish or Gentile. **For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.** Here is something that counts—something important. It is not a means of earning salvation, but something that flows from salvation. Faith in Christ expresses itself in our behavior.

### Obligation to love (verses 13-15)

Paul sums it up in verse 13: **You...were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.** The word for “serve” here is *douleō*, the verb form of *doulos*, or “slave.” Do not be a slave of the sinful nature, nor a slave of the law—but *do* be a slave in your love for one another.

Christ does not give us freedom so we can live selfishly—that would be slavery to passions—but he allows us to live the way of heaven: love. That obligation still remains (see Romans 13:8). If we want the kind of life that God offers, we should want to live that way even now.

Paul tells us to love *because* (the NIV unfortunately omits that connecting word) **the entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”** To paraphrase Paul's logic: When we love one another we have done everything that the law requires.

In chapter 3, Paul argued that the law was temporary, with authority only until Christ came. Here, he writes as if the law should still be done. Paul is using the word “law” in two senses. Law, referring to the old covenant, was temporary, but law in the sense of obligation to God and fellow humans is permanent.

Regulations about fabrics, food, and festivals are obsolete. But love is a law that is valid forever, because it is the essence of God and his realm, and



that is what he wants us to share in for all eternity. The need for love did not end when the old covenant ended, because love was valid before the old covenant began. If any part of the old covenant can be said to survive, it is only because it expresses what was already true anyway.

Paul's opponents in Galatia were probably saying that grace is not a sufficient guide to life, that we need the law to help us resist sin. Paul responds by saying that the solution to sin-slavery is not law-slavery—it is being enslaved to one another in love. If we do that, we are doing what the law required all along.

But what was happening in Galatia instead? They were bickering about fleshly rituals like circumcision, comparing themselves with each other to see who was the most scrupulous about things that really didn't matter. So Paul warns them, **If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.** An obsession with the details of the law does not come from love.

### Life by the Spirit (verses 16-24)

Paul says more about how God's Spirit (not the law) is the answer to the problem of sin: **So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.** When we are led by the Spirit, our lives change. We don't just "do whatever comes naturally"—we will put to death the habits that hurt other people.

This is often difficult: **For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.** We should serve one another in love, not serve ourselves in selfishness.

The Spirit is opposed to our sinful desires—but it is also opposed to the law. They are mutually incompatible: **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.** Our allegiance is to the Spirit, not the law. The Spirit will lead us into acts of service and love, not into old covenant rituals.

Paul mentions some of the negative results of selfishness: **The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual**

**immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft...** Those are obviously wrong.

Then Paul mentions a few sins—probably including a few things that the Galatians were currently experiencing in their doctrinal controversy: **hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.** He ends with a few more "obvious" sins: **drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.** People whose lives are filled with selfishness do not even *want* to be in a kingdom that is filled with love.

In contrast, **the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.**

The law does not deal with most of these things—but the Spirit does. When we are led by God, we go beyond what the law required. People who are fixated on the old covenant have set their sights too low.

The law is not the solution to sin. Jesus Christ is. We need him not only for mercy on the day of judgment, but for living the new life we have in this age. **Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.** In Christ, we have put those ways behind us and now we follow the Spirit in the ways of love. ●

#### Questions for discussion

- Christ is the Savior of all people, even those who don't believe (1 Timothy 4:10). So how could Christ be "of no value"? (v. 2)
- How does faith produce acts of love? (v. 6)
- Does Christian freedom mean that Christians are free to indulge their sinful nature? (v. 14)
- When we are led by the Spirit, how do we tell the difference between what we want and what the Spirit wants? (v. 17)
- Can we crucify our own desires and still remain the same person? (v. 24)

## The Greeks had a Word for it

### "Sarx"

The Greek word *sarx*, traditionally translated "flesh," is often rendered as "sinful nature" in the NIV. That is because Paul sometimes uses the word to refer to evil inclinations, not just bodily appetites and physical desires. In listing "works of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19-21, Paul includes mental sins and social rivalries as well as more fleshly sins such as sexual immorality.

Sometimes Paul seems to use the word as an alien power that

we must fight against. "You are controlled not by the *sarx* but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (Romans 8:9).

The word *sarx* had a double meaning when Paul argued with Judaizers. In their focus on circumcision, they were worried about the flesh. Paul says that Christianity is focused on the Spirit, not the flesh. ●