

Freed to serve through love (Galatians 5:13–16; reading Romans 6:12–7:6)

Every Christian needs to understand the relationship between freedom in Christ and the law. Salvation—past, present, and future—is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone without any works of the law. There is freedom in Christ from bondage to the law and from bondage to sin. Nevertheless that is not a freedom to live sinfully or lawlessly. Instead believers are freed to serve one another through love, thus fulfilling the law.

I. *Freed from the penalty and power of sin, but not to live sinfully (5:13).*

1. *Freedom in Christ belongs to the believer's calling.*

The believer is freed from the bondage of sin, its penalty and power, through the death of Jesus Christ “who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). The believer is also freed from bondage to the law “because by works of the law no one will be justified” (2:16) and because Christ, who was perfectly obedient, fulfilled for the believer the demands of the law.

2. *Freedom in Christ is not freedom to satisfy sinful desires.*

The “flesh” is the inherited, sinful nature which is fully inclined toward evil. It is from the “flesh” that sinful desires arise in opposition to God (*cf.* 5:17, 19–21). The believer should not exercise freedom in a way that gives a foothold to sinful desires in opposition to God. Toleration of sin can lead to a disastrous hardening of the heart (Hebrews 3:13).

3. *Freedom in Christ enables selfless service.*

Freedom in Christ means becoming slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:18) and enables a voluntary, selfless servitude through love, in contrast to the involuntary bondage to sin of all sinners (*cf.* John 8:34) and in contrast to the voluntary but burdensome and senseless bondage to the law (*cf.* 5:1). Jesus Christ offers an “easy yoke” (Matthew 11:28–30). To serve through love is not so much a command to be loving as you serve (though that is true), but to serve by being loving. For example, by being patient with others you serve them. (See 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 for further details on love.) This opens to all believers equal opportunity to serve.

Believers were called to freedom, freedom that allows you to serve through love.

II. *Freed from being under the law, but not to live lawlessly (5:14–15).*

1. *Being freed to serve through love is being freed to fulfill the law.*

The believer in Jesus Christ is not under the law in any of its aspects—moral, ceremonial, or civil—as a way to be right before God. But the whole law in its aspects pointed to the future work of Christ or revealed God’s character and holy standards. The Mosaic Law can be summarized in the two great commandments to love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–39). The first is necessary for the second, and the second demonstrates the reality of the first in a believer’s life (1 John 4:20–21). Thus the whole law reaches completion (fulfillment) in the life of believers as they love their neighbor as themselves. The law remains profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training (2 Timothy 3:16), but keeping the law does not contribute to one’s salvation.

2. *Being freed to serve through love opposes lawless, self-destructive conduct.*

Serving one another through love prevents the sinful behavior pictured as ‘beastly’ conduct in verse 15. The ‘flesh’ produces such evil desire (*cf.* James 4:1–3) and gains a beachhead in the lives of those who live so. Such loveless action is considered in Romans 14 when believers are cautioned with reference to eating meat not to destroy their brother (Romans 14:15).

Followers of Jesus Christ are not under law. Keeping the law will not save. But that does not free a person to sin. Instead believers by the Spirit are guided to serve one another through love.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- How is freedom in Christ (“Christian liberty”) misunderstood or even abused?
- If someone chooses not to serve others through love, are they in bondage? If so, what kind? If not, why not?
- Re-state the attributes of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–6 as expressions of serving. (See the example in the outline above.) Consider concrete examples in your own life on how to apply such service through love.
- When have differences about rights or rules turned into conflicts? How should these differences be addressed? (Consider how James 4:1–10 might help.)