

## How Christian Freedom Works

Scripture: Galatians 5:13–16

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Well, again this morning we're back in the book of Galatians, and I would encourage you to turn to chapter 5. For those of you who have not been with us, we have been looking at this wonderful epistle by the beloved Paul, and one of the concerns that we have addressed in our study of this is that there are certain Christians – and this is nothing new, but it seems to be rather popular today – certain Christians who say once you've come to Christ, once you've embraced Jesus as your Lord and Savior your sins are forgiven, you really don't have to worry about being concerned with God's law; you are free from the law. There are statements like that in Scripture, of course, we read some from Romans chapter 8; there are others here in Galatians. You're free from the law, so you don't need to bind your life with a lot of, sort of, duties to obey the law; you're free in Christ.

There are people who go so far as to say that the fact that you continue to sin gives God an opportunity to demonstrate His grace, and you allow Him to put His grace on display. So we shouldn't be bound by rules, we shouldn't be bound by the law as believers; we have been set free from that. They will say, "Whatever violation of the law we might have made Christ paid for that sin in His death; and furthermore, His life has been credited to our account. He lived a perfectly righteous life. God credited His life to our account; don't worry about the issue of sin and obedience." That is a heresy of epic proportions, even though it is extremely popular today.

And so, we have been endeavoring, as we look at the book of Galatians, to come to a true understanding of what the Christian life should be like and what should characterize the believer. And I want to continue that today by going back to chapter 5, verses 13 to 16. We began to look at it last week, and we'll wrap it up this morning.

Let me read these verses to you. Galatians 5:13, "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not" – use or "turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."

Now we're going to be looking at that passage; it's a very simple, straightforward one, and extremely practical. But let me kind of work my way in the direction of this passage with a few preliminary comments.

The Bible is crystal clear about one thing, that if a person loves God he keeps God's commandments. If a person loves God he obeys God's Word. That is essential in terms of the definition of a Christian. In fact, if someone loves God he not only obeys God, but he obeys God with

eagerness. He obeys God motivated by love. He desires to honor God, to worship God, to bring glory to God. He longs to see the will of God and the Word of God fulfilled. He loves God. True Christians love God.

On the other hand, if someone has no interest in keeping His commands or is indifferent to His commands, doesn't seem to be concerned about honoring God or obeying the word and the will of God, he hates God. Now that's an extreme statement, but there are only two possibilities: you either love God or you hate God. There is no middle ground. To show you this, let's go all the way back to the book of Exodus in chapter 20. Exodus chapter 20 sets forth this clear truth. You are either a lover of God or a hater of God.

In the twentieth chapter God speaks, and He says in verse 2, I am the Lord your God, who brought you" – meaning Israel – "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

Loving God is manifestly demonstrated in keeping His commandments. If you do not keep His commandments you are identified as one who hates God. This is repeated again in Deuteronomy chapter 5, verses 8 through 10. And then in Deuteronomy 32:41 we read that God judges with divine justice and divine vengeance "those who hate Me."

Now, there are people who would say, "Well, I certainly don't hate God." If you do not obey His commandments – which is a manifestation that you love Him – you hate Him. For anyone who does not obey His commandments hates Him. John 15:14 records the words of Jesus Himself: "If you love Me you will keep My commandments."

Now with all the discussion and dialog about this issue of Christian freedom let's be very clear: Christian freedom is not freedom to be indifferent toward the will of God. It is not freedom to be disobedient to God. That's what God-haters do; that's not what those who love God do.

Christian freedom cannot be to be disinterested in the honor of God, the glory of God, the Word of God. Christian freedom cannot be to be free to sin, to be free to be passive with regard to righteous, godliness, purity. Rather, Christian freedom must be expressed within the reality that I have been turned into a lover of God, and my freedom is defined as finding all the ways that I can express that love toward God; and that shows up in my obedience, and it shows up in my desire to honor Him, to glorify Him, and to worship Him. It is then the nature of a true Christian to love God and to love His Word and to love His commandments. Read Psalm 119, a hundred and seventy-six verses, a paean of love to God and His Word. Loving obedience is the mark of a true Christian.

But there is a new kind of pseudo-Christianity that is becoming very popular, it's flourishing in our generation, and the idea of it is to accommodate the current culture of sin. This is a sin-bent culture. It seems to be less restrained, if it's restrained at all, than previous cultures. Sinners want freedom to do what they want to do. They reject authority, they believe they have a right to whatever behaviors they choose to do, and they also have a right to be free from anyone's condemnation of those

choices.

As we said last week, sinners think that's freedom. What they don't understand is what Jesus said in John 8:34, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin." They think they're free in sinning. The truth is they're in bondage. They're captive to sin, they can do nothing else. They can choose the sins of their own preference, but that's all they can choose.

Now, they will take God and they will take Jesus, and they may take the church and some form of Christianity if it does not require them to abandon what they desire. And so, there are always going to be corrupted preachers who are eager to accept people on their terms, not on God's terms, demanding no repentance, no self-denial, no pursuit of godliness, holiness, purity, sanctification.

When you see someone like that, as we pointed out last week in 2 Peter, someone who advocates that kind of freedom you know you're dealing with a false teacher, because in 2 Peter chapter 2, we have false teachers described here in very graphic terms.

"They are like unreasoning animals to be captured and killed. They are stains and blemishes reveling in their deceptions. They have eyes full of adultery. They never cease from sin. They entice unstable souls. They have hearts trained in greed. They are accursed children. They are springs without water and mists driven by a storm for whom the black darkness has been reserved. They speak arrogant words of vanity. They entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality," – here's verse 19 – "promising freedom, promising freedom."

"We don't judge you, we accept you as you are. You're free to be whoever you want to be." This is the mark of false teachers, promising them freedom when they themselves – says that verse – are slaves of corruption. This kind of lawlessness, however, has gone to church, to be able to accept sinners as they are, and then to tell them that, "God accepts you as you are; and you can come, and Jesus will give you everything you want, fulfill all your desires," has given rise to a kind of antinomianism that is not only heretical, but deadly. Lawless forms of pseudo-Christianity designed to accommodate sinners and give them what they want abound these days.

Now remember, to become a true Christian you become a follower of Jesus Christ by denying yourself and taking up your cross. That means you deny yourself to such an extreme degree that it could cost you your life. You would give your life before you would usurp sovereignty over your own personal soul.

Becoming a Christian in reality is becoming a slave. It is slavery. It is the most rich, blessed, rewarding, joyful, fruitful, peaceful slavery, because it is a slavery of love. We love the Master who first loved us, and He lavishes us with all heavenly blessings in Christ. Faithful Christians are not trying to figure out how disobedient they can be before the Lord kills them in some sin unto death. They're not trying to figure out how selfish they can be before the Lord is so displeased He begins to do damage to the things in their life. Faithful Christians are not so committed to their own lusts and desires that they will press them out to the edge until divine displeasure becomes so evident that they are themselves stricken with some sickness. True Christians don't do that, they do the opposite: they run toward Christ, they run toward righteousness, they run toward purity, they run toward godliness, they run toward virtue; they run toward saints, not sinners.

It's the bizarre trend in pseudo-churches to avoid offending sinners in an effort to make them like the church; and maybe they'll like Jesus. But that is rebellion against the duty of the true church, which is to be pursuing with all its passion, holiness, virtue, godliness, sanctification; and its duty to the sinner is to confront the sinner's sin and selfishness, and call the sinner to deny all of that, even to the point of death, and follow Christ at every cost. To tell the sinner that, for the sinner to fulfill his own desires is an offense to God, and puts him on a path of judgment. This kind of pragmatic, useless, superficial trend is a substitute for the Scripture and the work of the Spirit, where you have the Spirit at work and the Scripture; you have people pursuing sanctification not self-fulfillment.

We have seen that the Word of God says we're free. But we have to define that freedom; and we've been doing that through Galatians. Yes, we are free from the bondage that the law imposed on us, which all sinners are still under, and that is this bondage: they can only sin, they can only sin. There's none that does good. Even what they think is good is filthy rags. That is their bondage.

In Christ we have been freed from that bondage to do what is right; not only to do what is right, but to love what is right, and to fulfill that which we now love. We have also been freed from the law's curse: "Cursed is everyone who violates the law of God." We are free then from the law's penalty. Christ removed the curse in His death and paid the penalty. But as Christians, we are not free from the moral law. We are not free from the law which is moral, which is an expression of the nature of God.

And if you love God you love His law. Loving the law of God is loving God, because the law of God is merely a radiating realization of the very nature of God. You cannot say, "I love God, I have no interest in His love." God is the sum of all His righteous virtues which are expressed in His law. It is impossible to love God and resist His law. It is equally impossible to resist His law and say you love God. We are the ones who are free. John 8:36, Jesus said, "If the Son makes you free, you're free indeed." You're really free.

So let's look now at our text with that bit of summary. Verse 13: "For you were called to freedom, brethren;" – talking to believers – "you were called to freedom." You were called out from the tyranny of the law, out from under the curse of the law, out from under the penalty of the law; and additionally, out from the external symbols of the law that were the ceremonial ritual regulations given to Moses: circumcision and other things – all the festivals and feasts, all the externals, all the shadows. You're free from all of those as well, you don't have to go back to that.

And that was what was going on in the Galatian churches. The Jews had come there and said they were believers in Christ, but said you cannot be a Christian unless you keep the laws, the externals that Moses gave to the people of Israel, and unless you're circumcised, of course, which was one of those. All of those had long since been laid aside; Christ laid them aside; clearly they were set aside.

These Jews were saying, "You just can't go from being a pagan to being a Christian. You have to go through Judaism; and the way you go through Judaism is by circumcision and keeping the ceremonies of Moses. You have to do that." Paul was saying, "You don't have to do that; you're free from that as well, as well as the bondage of the law, the curse of the law, the penalty of the law. You're free from the shadowy symbols of the law that were given to Israel in the past. You're free from the shadow because the substance is Christ, and He has come." As Paul says to the Colossians, "Don't let anybody hold you to a Sabbath, a new moon, a feast day, or anything else, or any dietary laws," the Holy Spirit shows Peter, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat. There's nothing that's

unclean anymore.” The shadows are gone, the substance is here.

We are free. But now what does that freedom mean? Well, as I’ve said, it’s freedom to love God; and loving God means loving His law, because His law is only an expression of His nature. So let’s look at this text.

The call to freedom here is seen in four very simple ways, very practical. First of all, we are free to oppose the flesh. This is new. Since you have come to Christ you are now free to oppose the flesh.

Go back to verse 13: “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh.” The flesh, as we saw last time, is our unredeemed humanness, the sin that remains in us until glorification. We are free now for the first time, as we read in Romans 8, to fulfill the law. The law once condemned us because we violated it and could only violate it; and now we can fulfill it by the power of the new creation and the Holy Spirit.

So, first of all, you do not have a freedom to indulge the flesh, you have the freedom to oppose the flesh. So do not turn your freedom into an opportunity. “Opportunity” is a military word for “a base.” Don’t let your flesh be the base of operation.

This is so frequently going on today that appeals are made in pseudo-churches for people to decide what it is they want, and then tell God they want that and virtually speak it into existence, so that it’s as if God wanted them to be able to fulfill by His will and power the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Do not operate off your flesh. Do not operate off those things which are part of unredeemed humanness. We know what those are; go down to verse 17.

First of all, there is a great battle. This tells us how the flesh functions: “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit.” So you’re a believer, the Spirit lives in you, and the flesh is warring against the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. “These are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”

There’s a war going on in you, and it’s a fight against your flesh. It is a fight toward righteousness, toward purity, toward virtue, toward godliness; and it is empowered by the Spirit. But there is present the flesh. Therein lies the opposition.

And what is it that the flesh wants? Go down to verse 19, very explicit; and we’ll look at these a few weeks from now: “The deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry,” – worshiping anything other than God – “sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

If you are living in the illusion that you’ve added Jesus to your life and living only for the fulfillment of your own flesh Paul wants you to know you will never ever enter the kingdom of God. People who practice the deeds of the flesh as the pattern of life will never enter the kingdom of God. So our freedom is limited.

Now, let’s just take the big picture. Our freedom is limited by anything that God forbids or anything

that God requires. We must do what He requires us to do and not do what He forbids us to do. And it isn't that that's oppressive, it is not.

Again, it is a fight for joy, because joy is at the other end of obedience. John says, "I write these things unto you, that your joy may be full." It's a fight for joy, peace. It's a fight from love for joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control – all the fruit of the Spirit. That's the battle that's going on. You as a believer are fighting against the flesh so that you may be filled with the Spirit, and that your life might be marked by the fruit of the Spirit. It's a fight for joy and peace and all those glorious promises.

So let's just start with this. Your freedom does not mean freedom to be indifferent to the will and Word of God, or to be disobedient. It is the freedom to obey; it is the freedom to pursue righteousness. You have become a slave of righteousness; and it is a willing, loving slavery, because you have such a loving Lord who lavishes you with all these blessings through His Spirit.

But that is not the only limitation on your freedom; not just those things God requires and those things God forbid. There's even more limit on our freedom, and that is regarding things that are not forbidden and things that are not necessarily required by God. There are a lot of things that aren't in the Bible, right, a lot of things. We talk about certain habits aren't in the Bible, certain behaviors that are not in the Bible.

The Bible doesn't say things specifically about certain forms of entertainment. The Bible doesn't say anything in particular about certain things that people do recreationally. It doesn't say anything in explicit terms about whether you should drink or not drink, whether should attend a theater or not attend a theater, whether you should indulge in recreation at this level or that level, or whether you should take a vacation, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, an extended vacation – the Bible doesn't talk about that. The Bible doesn't talk about categories of behavior that are neither righteous or unrighteous. But life is full of those kinds of decisions that we have to make.

So what do we do? Well, look, if you are an antinomian and you think you're free from sin, you've got no problem with these things. If you think you're free from any condemnation, and so you don't have to worry about sin, you're not going to live under law – as I said last week – you're going to follow the lead of that preacher who said, "Just remember that the Lord called you to a dance, not a war. You don't need to feel like you're a soldier, just go dance your life away."

So if you think that you're just supposed to go blissfully and have fun and ignore the law of God because Christ paid for your sin anyway, and Christ's perfect life has already been credited to your account, so there's no loss, so live it up; if that's what you think, you're going to have interest in what I'm about to say, because what I'm about to say is, not only is that heretical and may well indicate that you're not a Christian or you would love God and His law, but your freedom also has further limits on things that aren't forbidden in Scripture. How do you deal with those? Well, let me give you a handful of questions that will answer how you deal with them.

First question. I ask this question all the time. I've asked it throughout my life when there is something that is not forbidden in Scripture and not commanded in Scripture. I could do it, maybe not, maybe yes. The first question I ask is this: Will it be spiritually profitable? Will it be spiritually profitable? And I draw that out of 1 Corinthians, and I want you to follow me, because these are very

helpful and practical, 1 Corinthians chapter 6. And they're just very pithy, short, direct statements.

First Corinthians 6:12, Paul says this: "All things are lawful for me," – and by that he means all things that are not forbidden – "all things that are lawful are lawful for me. All things that God doesn't forbid are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable." Not all things are beneficial. Not all things are to my spiritual advantage. Instead of thinking, "How can I live as close as possible to the edge of sin and survive, and how can I live as close as possible to the tolerances of God with regard to doubtful things and still be okay?" you ask the question that is at the other end of the spectrum, "Is this spiritually beneficial? Is it to my advantage?"

There are a lot of things that are lawful. There are a lot of things that you could do. But will they be spiritually profitable? Because everything in the believer's life needs to be spiritually profitable. And that's what we desire. And spiritual benefits and spiritual blessings as they come to us come full of joy and peace.

Question number one: Will it be spiritually profitable? Question number two: Will it build me up? Will it build me up? Or, will it edify me? Listen to 1 Corinthians 10:23, another one of these very direct statements.

Verse 23, he repeats what I just read in chapter 6: "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable." Then he says this: "All things are lawful, but not all things edify." So now we're not only looking for something that's profitable, beneficial, we're looking for something that builds us up, something that strengthens us. We've moved from a kind of minimal, "Is it going to have a spiritual benefit?" to now, "Is it going to actually make me stronger as a believer? Is it going to lift me up, build me up, edify me?"

There's a third question; and for this one I want you to turn to Hebrews chapter 12, Hebrews chapter 12, familiar, coming right after the heroes of faith in chapter 11. In chapter 12 we're talking about a life of faith. So the writer says, "We have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us," and they all give testimony to the validity and blessing of a life of faith. It's not that they're sitting in a stadium watching us please; they're in heaven, they couldn't care less about us. What it is is that they are living in glory because they lived a life of faith; and the life of faith – it's recorded about them in the eleventh chapter – speaks to the blessing connected to that kind of life. So we have all these people giving testimony to the blessing of the life of faith. So since we see the value of that, "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

The writer says the word "race" is *agōn* from which we get "agony." It's an effort, it's an effort; it requires endurance. There's a long race. This is a lifelong marathon we're engaged in. This is a very hard, long race. And in order to run this race effectively there are two things that you need to eliminate. "Lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us." It easily entangles us because it's there in us, in our flesh.

So he says there are two things: "sin," that's clear; we know what that is – what God forbids. But what is this encumbrance? It's not sin, because it's used as another burden. It is encumbrance and the sin. So what is the encumbrance? The Greek term is *ogkos*, it means "bulk." It isn't sin, it is something else that is unnecessary weight.

So the third question is this: If I do this, will it hinder my running the race of faith? Will it weigh me down? Do I need to carry this? You don't see a hundred-meter sprinter with an overcoat. You don't see an athlete going out to run a marathon carrying a suitcase. That's the unnecessary bulk.

Is it something that diverts my attention, that sucks my energy, that lowers my eyes from looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of the faith? Is it something that reorders my priorities? Is it something that eats up my energy uselessly? Is it something that fills my mind of things that have no value like watching stupid videos, and reading stupid literature, and filling your mind with things that have no value? Why would you want to run the race of endurance carrying around that kind of baggage?

So, my freedom is not freedom to sin, and it's not even freedom to do things that might not be sinful in themselves, but they don't provide any spiritual benefit, they don't build me up, and they very well could slow me down in the race? And I want to run, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9, to what? To win.

Here's another question: If I do this will it be likely to start a habit? Go back to 1 Corinthians 6 again. Will it be likely to start a habit? We started with 1 Corinthians 6, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable." And right after that he says this: "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything."

"In doing this, am I going down a path that's going to create a habit, like not being able to shut off your cell phone, not being able to live without the distractions?" I don't want to start a habit that sucks my attention and my energy and my focus. This is to be brought under the power of someone, or under the power of something other than the Spirit of God. I don't want to become a slave to anything except my Lord and righteousness – and one more thing I'll mention in a moment.

So, "If I do this is it profitable? Will it build me up or will it hinder me in the race of faith? Is it likely to start a bad habit that I can't break and it eats up huge amounts of my resources financially, time-wise, energy-wise, focus-wise?

Another question: Will it be consistent with Christlikeness? First John 2:6, 1 John 2:6 is a very simple principle. I've basically thought of this my whole life: "The one who says he abides in Him" – Christ – "ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." "Would Jesus do this? Would Jesus be involved in this?" That's a pretty high standard, isn't it? Will it be consistent with Christlikeness? And remember in Galatians 4:19 Paul said, "I'm in labor again until Christ is formed in you."

And then another question that you perhaps have asked: Will it glorify God, right? Will it glorify God? First Corinthians 10:31, "Whatever you do, whatever, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

So you see, a Christian is not saying, "How much sin can I get away with? And how much sort of neutral stuff can I fill my life with because I'm under grace, and I don't want to live this life of law?" No, the Christian says, "How hard can I run in the direction of righteousness? How devoted can I be toward godliness, purity, and holiness? And how can I eliminate out of my life anything, even things that aren't forbidden but that have the power to pull me in the wrong direction? Freedom in Christ is far from freedom to sin. It's even far from freedom to indulge yourself in all the distractions, all the bulk, all the encumbrances, all the bad habits that life offers us.



In Galatians 5, verse 16, again let's focus back to our freedom: "I say walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." Verse 24: "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." If you're Christ's you're not trying to figure out how much damage you can do, you're trying to figure out how much you can run toward righteousness.

So we have freedom, but freedom to oppose the flesh. Second, freedom to serve others. Back to verse 13, end of the verse, "but through love serve one another." Through love, *agapē*, the highest, noblest, sacrificial, humble love. This is the highest of all loves, reflecting selflessness.

This is the kind of love that our Lord demonstrates as recorded in Philippians chapter 2 where it says, "He didn't think that His position with God was something to be grasped and hold onto it, but He humbled Himself, took upon the form of a slave who's made in the likeness of man, humbled Himself all the way to death, even to death on a cross." "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Humble.

"Through love serve one another." So now I've got another problem; not only do I have to ask all these questions about me, but I have to ask all those questions about the people around me. Will this behavior build them up? Will this be profitable to them, or will this hinder them in the race? Will this be an encumbrance to them? Will this be for them an example in the direction of Christlikeness and glorifying God?

So I not only ask it about myself, I ask it about everyone else, because this is, "Through love serve one another." By the way, the word "serve" here, *douleuō*, you're a slave to others. Everybody is your master in some sense. You're a slave to righteousness even though you're free, you're a slave to Christ who is your Lord and Master even though you're free, and you're a slave to others. I am a slave to nonbelievers, as we'll see, to live a life that moves them in the direction of spiritual growth.

Look at 1 Corinthians 8. So much of this is in 1 Corinthians, as Paul obviously is dealing with serious misunderstanding of Christian freedom in the Corinthian church. But just to pick out a few things, 1 Corinthians 8. We don't have time to go into all the contexts, but look at verse 9: "But take care that this liberty of yours," – and he's talking about the issue of eating meat had been offered to idols, which an idol was nothing, the meat was nothing, didn't matter spiritually, but it offended some people who had been converted out of idolatry that somebody would eat meat offered to that idol from which they had just escaped. So Paul says, "Take care that this liberty of yours," – liberty to eat the meat. The fact that it's offered to an idol doesn't matter, because an idol is nothing.

"But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." If there's a new, young believers who's been saved out of idolatry and you're eating meat offered to the idol that was their capture, their demonic capture, and they've been liberated from that, that would offend them; don't eat it. So now your liberty is not only limited by those things that matter for your spiritual growth, your liberty is limited by those things that matter for somebody else's spiritual growth. You don't want to go against that brother's conscience.

Verse 11 says, "You'll ruin a weaker brother for whose sake Christ died." Verse 12, "You'll wound their conscience," – and if you do that – "you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I'll never eat meat again," – he's not talking about being a vegetarian, he means meat

offered to idols – “so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.” This again is even further away from antinomianism. Now I am limited by what somebody around me’s expectations are and what might offend them.

Chapter 9, Paul says, “I’m free. Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Look, I’m at the top of the, sort of, food chain here. I’m free; I’m an apostle; I’ve seen our Lord personally. You’re the evidence of my apostleship, you are my work in the Lord,” as if to say, “You’d imagine I had the right to do anything I want.”

But go to verse 19: “Though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.” Now he’s talking about freedom not to offend a believer, but freedom not to offend a nonbeliever. Now this means that if I am a believer I am concerned to live my life in such a way that it will benefit other believers, and even benefit nonbelievers. I don’t want to do anything in my life that would do damage to a nonbeliever that I want to win.

In chapter 10, verse 27, he pictures going to dinner at an unbeliever’s house. “If an unbeliever invites you, eat whatever he puts up,” you know, just eat it – meat offered to idols, whatever it is, just go ahead and eat it. You don’t have a conscience problem, just eat it, don’t ask any questions. “If someone says, ‘This is sacrificed to idols,’ do not eat it.”

What’s that? Let’s say you had a new Christian with you, you went to the house of a pagan guy, pagan guy brings out meat and he says, “This is the best meat in town. We get it over at the pagan temple; they offer it to the gods. It comes out of the butcher shop, and it’s really great meat.” And there’s a gasp from this weaker brother, this young Christian who’s been saved out of the damning reality of having worshiped that very idol.

So now you’re in a dilemma. “Who do I offend? Do I offend the Christian brother or do I offend the unbeliever?” Pragmatism would tell you, “Offend the brother, don’t offend the nonbeliever,” right? You’ve got to win the nonbeliever.

The Bible says, “Offend the nonbeliever. Don’t eat. For love’s sake don’t eat. If you do eat and you offend the brother, the unbeliever will conclude it’s better to be a nonbeliever than a brother, because they take more care about me than they do about each other.”

“By this shall all men know that you’re My disciples, that you have” – what? – “love for one another.” Love the brother and say no to the nonbeliever, and let him see that this is a union of love. This is something he’ll know nothing about. Put love on display; make whatever sacrifice you need to make.

And the end of the chapter, verse 33, “just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so they may be saved.” He is saying that not eating and offending that nonbeliever is the pathway for salvation for him, because he’s going to see the love that you have for one another. That’s something he’d know nothing about.

This idea that you’re supposed to live any way you want is so alien to Scripture. You obey the law of God because you love it. And even where there is no law of God regarding certain behaviors you run in the direction of what edifies and builds you up and gives you strength, and honors God and is like Christ, and you are determined not to live a life that would be a stumbling block to another believer to

do something that if that believer felt free to do it might destroy him.

People have asked me through the years, “Do you drink alcohol?” No, never. I wouldn’t do that. Why wouldn’t I do that? Because I don’t want anybody ever to be able to say, “I drink alcohol because John MacArthur does,” and some of them end up a disaster. That’s my concern. I have to live my life not only as a slave to believers serving them that way, but even nonbelievers for the sake of them being saved.

Paul deals with this again. Look at Romans 14. Romans 14, verse 13 – actually, verse 12 says we’re going to have to give an account of ourselves to God. “So let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” Pretty simple, isn’t it?

Verse 1 of chapter 15: “Bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. For Christ even didn’t please Himself.” So what does Christian freedom mean? It is freedom to oppose the flesh and freedom to serve others.

Thirdly – and now you can go back to Galatians – is freedom to fulfill the law at its highest level. It is freedom to fulfill the law at its highest level. Verse 14: “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” That’s quoted, by the way, from Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In Romans 13 – and I know you’re familiar with this – the apostle Paul says basically that this love fulfills the law. It says, verse 8, Romans 13, “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.” There you go. You want to fulfill the law, just love your neighbor.

“For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet.’ If there’s any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You love your neighbor as yourself.’” If you love your neighbor you don’t commit adultery with your neighbor’s wife. If you love your neighbor you don’t murder your neighbor, you don’t steal from your neighbor, you don’t covet what your neighbor has. Love then sums up the law; that’s the point.

The problem with the law was, the law was an external force, and the heart was wretched and couldn’t obey. Now the law has gone inside and the power of the Holy Spirit and the love that is poured out in us allows us to love our neighbor. I don’t have signs on my garage reminding me not to kill my neighbor, or not to covet what he has or steal from him. All I have to do is love my neighbor and the whole law is fulfilled.

Verse 10: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” So when you live a life of love for others, yes, that’s limiting your freedom. But again, that’s a fight for love, isn’t it, that’s a fight for joy, that’s a fight for peace. This is called – and we’ll see it in chapter 6, verse 2 – the law of Christ. The law of Christ is the law of love.

And when we walk in the Spirit – chapter 5, verse 22 – the fruit of the Spirit is love, and everything flows out of that. Romans 5:5, “The love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts, poured out

within our hearts by the Holy Spirit who's given to us."

One final thing just quickly and we'll be done. You are free to oppose the flesh, serve others, and fulfill the law at its highest level by love, and fourthly, to avoid destructive conflict, to avoid destructive conflict. One of the things that happens when people think they have every right to do what they want is they careen through life leaving a trail of broken lives. They just crash and burn into people. But Paul says in verse 15, "If you bite and devour one another," – you know, in the mad dash for your own freedom – "take care that you're not consumed by one another."

"It'll come back and get you if you bite, *daknete*," used of crocodiles or poisonous snakes. "Devour" means "to gulp down." If you're like an alligator or a crocodile careening through life chomping on people and swallowing them – the word "devour" is *analōthēte* from which we get "annihilate." "If you're going through life annihilating people for the sake of your own freedom take care that you're not consumed by one another."

The lovelessness of sin, the lovelessness of indifference literally causes conflict everywhere. Where there is love and where there is sacrificial service, conflict disappears. Fighting and devouring, that's simply disobeying the commandments of God, that's not being loving.

So how is it possible for us to live like this? Verse 16: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you'll not carry out the desire of the flesh." You're no longer under the external control of law and a threat, you're under the internal control of the Holy Spirit and love; and all of that drives you in the direction of sanctification.

Spurgeon said, "Holiness is essentially voluntary." That's right. It's not the external law, it's voluntary in the sense that it's the work of the Spirit on your heart. Spurgeon said, "The Holy Spirit educates from the Scripture as He operates on the mind. Hence when the understanding is enlightened to see the beauty of holiness, the will is certain to seek after it, and the heart is induced to obey." It's a fight for joy and peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control. And against such there is no law.

Father, we thank You again for a wonderful time of fellowship and in Your Word. Lord, please accomplish Your will for Your glory in every life. For that we give You praise in Christ's name. Amen.

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