

Serve One Another Galatians 5:13

Slavery was legal and a major part of most cultures until the early 1800s. William Wilberforce was largely responsible for ending slavery in the British empire. As a member of the British parliament, he had been trying to end slavery for many years. After 20 years of work, in 1807, he finally helped pass the Slave Trade Act, and then in 1833, Britain passed the Slavery Abolition Bill. Wilberforce died three days later, having lived long enough to see the fulfillment of his great goal—to end slavery in Britain.

Freedom and slavery seem to be opposite ideas, and in many respects, they are. However, in the Christian life, we are both free and slaves/servants.

Gal 5:13 For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

In Galatians, Paul describes life under the OT system as being “confined” under the power of sin and “kept” under the OT Law (3:22-23). The Law did not set anyone free from sin; it simply made them more aware of how sinful they were.

Once Christ began His ministry, the Law of Moses became God’s means “to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (3:24). Christ fulfilled the requirements and penalties of the Law on behalf of believers. Freedom from the Law frees believers to serve others.

So we are free in a certain sense, but we are still servants in a certain sense. We are free from the OT law and free from the power and penalty of sin, but now we are servants—servants of God and of one another.

This summer, I’ve been looking at various “one another” passages. Galatians 5:13 tells us, “by love, serve one another.” Let’s consider what this verse tells us about both Christian freedom and Christian service for one another.

- I. .13 We have been called unto liberty. “ye have been called unto liberty”
- A. The calling in view here is God’s call to salvation. Paul had brought the Gospel to the people of Galatia. Some of them had believed and formed several churches in the region.
 - B. The particular liberty/freedom he’s talking about here is freedom from the OT system of rules and regulations.
 - C. Paul wrote this letter to the Galatian believers because some false teachers had come to the church (the Judaizers), claiming that obedience to the OT law was necessary to be saved. Paul strongly disagreed with that claim. Adopting the OT law with its regulations and rituals represented spiritual bondage. Christ set us free from all of that.
 - D. The Judaizers were teaching that good works—keeping the OT law—were required for salvation. But that is not true. Christ sets us free from works as a means of salvation. We are saved by faith alone, by grace alone, and through Christ alone. Works have no role in salvation.
 - E. If we are not under the OT law, and if works do not save, someone might claim, then, that we can live any way we want to.

Trans: The danger in view here is that we would use our freedom in Christ improperly. So Paul goes on to teach that...

II. Liberty is not an occasion to the flesh.

The great danger of liberty/freedom is the abuse/distortion of it. It’s easy to think that freedom gives us the right to sin.

Jude 4 *godless men ... change the grace of our God into a license for immorality*

Christian freedom is *not* a license for bad behavior.

- A. Liberty is qualified/limited.
 - 1. .13b The word “only” here signals a qualification on freedom. We don’t have *absolute* freedom in Christ. We are free from the OT law and its curse, but that does not give us a license to sin.
 - 2. Christian freedom has parameters or limits. It’s not freedom from all rules or restrictions or constraints.

Illus.: When you get your driver’s license, you are free to drive. But you have to follow the rules of the road.

Likewise, Christian freedom gives us certain privileges but also imposes certain limits.

B. Liberty is not a starting point for sin. It's not an "occasion to the flesh."

1. The word "occasion" literally means "starting point." The word implies an opportunity or an excuse.
2. In warfare, the word described a base of operations, the place from which a military operation began. It came to mean the origin, occasion, or means for undertaking something.

Illus.: On D-Day in WWII, the allies began their invasion of France by gaining control of several beaches. From those bases of operation, they took the rest of the land.

Certain things in our lives can act like a base of operation for other sins. If we allow sin in one area, it can spread out to other areas.

E.g., David's sin with Bathsheba—that indulging of the flesh led to murder. One sin led to another. One area of compromise led to a whole series of problems for David and his family. That's what happens when we allow sin to have a base of operation in our lives. If we allow it in one place, it tends to spread.

We must not allow sin to have a beachhead or base of operations in our lives.

C. Liberty is not an occasion/opportunity/excuse to indulge "the flesh."

The concern is that Christians would use their freedom from the OT law as an excuse to indulge their "flesh." What is that?

1. Definition of "flesh"

a) By "flesh," Paul does not mean the physical body.

(1) The word "flesh" is used to describe the human body sometimes, but that's not how he's using the word here.

(2) The human body is not sinful in and of itself. The body is often the means by which we fulfill our evil desires, but the human body itself is not sinful.

b) In this case, "flesh" refers to the sinful nature, our natural tendency toward sin; our sinful inclinations/appetites. The flesh is our old, pre-conversion selfish desires, its evil impulses.

Gal 5 gives us a list of the “works of the flesh” that we must avoid.

1 John 2:16 warns us about the “lust of the flesh.” We naturally want to fulfill the evil desires of the human nature.

2. Defilement of the flesh

The warning/caution: don’t let Christian freedom serve as an excuse to indulge your sinful appetites.

Today we have more opportunities/occasions than ever to indulge the flesh. Someone out there is catering to/providing for /encouraging just about any sinful desire that a person might have. There are many opportunities to yield to the sinful desires of the flesh.

The flesh—the old sin nature—is always looking for opportunities/excuses/foot holds. TV, movies, Internet, music – these are all opportunities to indulge the sinful nature/the flesh. Things that used to be unmentionably shameful are now done in public; people are proud of their perversity.

Many people today excuse their sinful living by claiming freedom in Christ. They claim that God loves them no matter what they do. God loves them just as they are. If they have these desires of the flesh, it must be OK with God to fulfill them. After all, God wants me to be happy, so I must fulfill my desires.

The culture’s hatred of moral restrictions has penetrated the church. Many of the social taboos commonly condemned in previous generations are now widely practiced among Christians. Modern believers feel that they are free to drink, smoke, gamble, watch raunchy movies, read smutty novels, curse, dance, mutilate their bodies, etc. Previous generations thought of such things as inappropriate if not outright sinful. Many have decided that all those restrictions were unnecessary. That was all legalism (they claim); we know better now.

The problem is that many of these so-called freedoms are really just excuses for indulging the sinful nature. And many have found that exercising these freedoms leads to slavery.

Fulfilling the lusts of the flesh does not free us; it enslaves us. Our appetites for pleasure, relaxation, excitement, or variety can bring us into bondage if we over-indulge them. The more we indulge the flesh, the deeper we plunge into bondage and slavery.

Part of overcoming the power of the flesh is to starve it of opportunities. Don't give the flesh a base of operations. The Bible tells us to mortify the flesh—put it to death.

Rom 8:13 *For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.*

- D. Living a fleshly, self-indulgent lifestyle demonstrates that you not saved. Christians can't live that way. We can't justify our sin or excuse it by appealing to our freedom in Christ. The Holy Spirit within us motivates us to love righteousness and hate sin.
- E. Christian liberty is not freedom from the struggle against sin. Believers will always have to contend against the old nature. Galatians 5 tells us that the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. So the battle against the flesh is lifelong and persistent/constant.

Trans: Instead of seeing Christian freedom as an occasion or excuse for indulging our sinful appetites, we should see that

- III. Liberty is an opportunity to serve one another. .13c “by love serve one another”

We finally come to the “one another” part of this passage.

Love is the solution to the problem. Notice a couple of things he tells us about love.

- A. Love stands in contrast to indulging the flesh.
 - 1. Note the strong contrasting word, “but.” Serving the flesh is on one side; serving others is on the other side. Instead of indulging the sinful nature, liberty gives us an occasion to serve others.
 - 2. The flesh—the old sin nature—is selfish; it cares only about itself. The flesh sees freedom as a means of self-indulgence and self-gratification. Through the flesh, we serve ourselves.

3. Christian freedom liberates us from fulfilling our selfish desires and motivates us to find joy in serving others. Freedom from the bondage of sin leads to loving service for others. Instead of focusing on our own needs/desires, love motivates us to meet the needs of others.

Quote: Those who [indulge their] natural desires are not free but slaves, whereas those who live in love are liberated to serve others, so that slavery to the will of God is perfect freedom.¹

B. Love motivates service.

1. “by love” is literally “through the love.” I.e., serve one another by means of the love.
2. Love is self-giving not self-centered. The word here is *agape*, which often in the Bible describes godly, self-sacrificial love. Love is willing to give for the benefit of the one loved. It’s not a romantic attraction or a warm, fuzzy feeling. Love is giving of yourself for the good of others. Love motivates us to serve.
3. Note that this service is to be directed to “one another.” Of course, the original audience for this book was the members of the churches in Galatia. “One another,” then, in context, refers to the others in the church.

1 John 4:10 *if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

4. So instead of indulging the sinful nature—which is very self-centered—we are to focus on serving others. Christian liberty redirects the focus from ourselves to others. Instead of indulging the evil, selfish desires of the flesh, we should be thinking about how we can serve others.

Philippians 2:4 *Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

For Christians, *service* takes the place of *selfishness*. Love for self is replaced by love for others.

5. Service restricts.
 - a) We are free, but that freedom limited.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 336.

- b) The word for “serve” is from the root word for “slave.” One translation renders the passage “become slaves of one another.” Perhaps the emphasis here is on humble service, being willing to serve others humbly, like a slave.
- c) In a certain sense, Christian freedom enslaves us. Freedom and love motivate us toward humble service for the benefit of others.

Quote: The Galatian Christians were rescued from the slavery which [the OT law] imposed, and brought into a new servitude, that of a loving, glad, and willing service to God and man which [subtracts] self and subordinates all selfish desires to love.²

Our focus in the church is not on being served, but on serving others. We can’t take a consumeristic approach to the church, i.e., thinking “How does the church serve me?” Church is not primarily the place we come to be served. Our focus in coming to church is to give our worship to God and to serve others.

The flesh asks, “How am I being served?” Love asks “How can I serve?”

God has gifted every believer—we all have at least one spiritual gift. And God expects us to use our gifts for the benefit of the body—the church. Are you using your gifts to serve others?

Others are perhaps serving you; how are you serving others? Everyone ought to be involved in both sides of this service—giving and receiving.

IV. Practical tips for serving one another in love

- A. We must shift our focus from self to others. Instead of indulging the flesh, we should focus on serving one another.
- B. Make sure that love is the motivating factor in your service to others.
 - 1. Love for God must be primary. Our devotion to God and obedience to His Word require that we love one another.
 - 2. It is only because we love God that we are able to love one another.

² Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Ga 5:13.

3. We can keep on serving others even when they fail us or disappoint us. Serving others is difficult and often disappointing. Others will fail us, but we continue to serve others because, ultimately, we are serving God by serving others.
- C. “Serve one another” is a broad command that could involve a wide range of activities. Think of practical ways of demonstrating love to others by serving them. Each of the “one another” passages tells us how to do this.
1. Be devoted to one another.
 2. Honor one another.
 3. Be of the same mind with one another.
 4. Accept one another.
 5. Greet one another.
 6. Bear one another’s burdens.
 7. Submit to one another.
 8. Be hospitable to one another.
 9. Encourage one another.
 10. Pray for one another.
- D. We serve God by serving one another. God has gifted us for service, so we ought to be seeking ways to serve God’s people in the context of the church. We express our love for others by serving them.

Paul tells us in Gal 5:13 “by love serve one another.” Instead of focusing on our own desires and appetites, we should focus on others and think of ways to serve them. This is how we demonstrate Christian love.

We are free in Christ, but we do not use our freedom to fulfill our own sinful desires. Instead, we use our freedom to serve one another.