

# **Galatians**

## **Limiting Freedom with Love**

*Galatians 5:13-15*

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# Limiting Freedom with Love

## Scripture

The pastor had heard the story so many times that listening to it again evoked a strange mixture of anger and despair. Although the names, dates, and places had changed, the story's theme remained the same: one of his parishioners, Phil, had caused another Christian to stumble. This time, the casualty was Lana, a nineteen-year-old whom Phil had dated for the past seven months.

According to her parents, Phil had wooed Lana to her first taste of beer and wine, her first drug high, her first X-rated movie, and her first all-night date. His natural charm and live-and-let-live spirit attracted her like a moth to a flame. And though she struggled with his flippant attitude toward their church's moral teaching, she was captivated by his interpretation of Christian freedom.

As he was fond of saying, "Jesus set us free so we could explore life to the fullest, not so we could be held back by someone's list of dos and don'ts."

Persuaded by Phil, Lana spread her moral wings and flew into taboo airspace. There she joined a new flock of friends, saw new landscapes, and experienced new thrills. It all seemed so right, so freeing—at least for a while.

After five months the pleasures became oppressive demands. The scenery turned ugly and treacherous, and the once-inviting, eagle-like friends showed themselves to be disgusting vultures.

Lana felt the current of her lifestyle pulling her down to the point of no return, but regardless of how hard she fought, she couldn't stop falling. Alcoholism, drug addiction, and sexual escapades held her in a vice-like grip.

Desperate, she finally turned to the two people who had repeatedly proved their love—her mother and father. Through an unbroken stream of tears, she bared her soul, pleading for help. Her parents, in turn, went to their pastor seeking solace and counsel.

As the pastor listened to Lana's parents, he recalled his many confrontations with Phil. Each time he had explained to Phil that his concept of Christian freedom was unbiblical and damaging to himself and others. But each time Phil had stood his ground, refusing even to entertain the idea that he was wrong.

How could Phil be stopped? What would convince him?

The pastor wasn't sure, but one thing was clear: Lana and her parents had become the victims of freedom abuse. And, like anyone who is abused, they needed the warm embrace of love, not the cold finger of condemnation.<sup>1</sup>

Do you know a Lana? Have you come under the spell of a Phil? Do you really understand what Lana learned the hard way—that authentic Christian freedom has limits? Or have you sided with Phil by rejecting this truth?

These serious questions demand soul-searching answers. And only God's Word provides a standard by which we can accurately gauge our responses. So let's turn to the Word of God and learn how to answer these questions. Let us read Galatians 5:13-15:

**<sup>13</sup> You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. <sup>14</sup> The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup> If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. (Galatians 5:13-15)**

## Introduction

Dr. Bryan Chapell tells the story of a radio preacher who broadcast meditations on the radio in St. Louis. Each morning he would address some topic with Bible verse or two. The subjects ran the gamut from procrastination, to parenting, to honesty on the job. The radio station would turn up the reverberation so that

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<sup>1</sup> This story is found in the book by Charles R. Swindoll titled *Galatians* (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1981), 103.

whenever the preacher spoke, it sounded as if his words were coming directly from Mount Sinai!

Dr. Chapell said that he could imagine people nodding their heads in assent as the radio preacher exhorted his listeners to practice punctuality, good parenting, honesty, and so on.

The problem, however, with the messages was two-fold. First, the preacher was not even a Christian. The preacher in fact represented a large cult in St. Louis. The second problem was that the messages were sub-Christian.<sup>2</sup>

When teaching about the rules that are in the Bible, it is vitally important that we put them in their proper context. As Dr. Chapell says, “The rules don’t change; the reasons do.” By that he means that Christians obey the rules given in God’s Word for the right reasons. In other words, Christians obey the teaching of God’s Word in order to express gratitude for salvation. Christians do not obey God’s Word in order to gain salvation.

## Lesson

The apostle Paul gives us a wonderful example of obeying God’s Word for the right reasons. The false teachers—known as Judaizers—were teaching the Galatians that they ought to obey God’s rules in order to earn their salvation.

However, the apostle Paul insists that the reason Christians obey God’s rules is in order to express gratitude to God for the salvation already received.

So, in Galatians 5:13-15 we shall see a restatement of our freedom. Then, we shall notice some limitations on our freedom. And finally, we shall observe some guidelines for our balance.

### I. A Restatement of Our Freedom (5:13a)

Paul begins with a restatement of our freedom.

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<sup>2</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 267.

Paul says in verse 13a: **“You, my brothers, were called to be free.”** This is a restatement of Galatians 5:1a, where he says, “It is for freedom that Christ has set you free.”

These few words declare that all of us who have received Christ by faith are free. We have been set free from the penalty of sin, the power of Satan, the wrath of God, and an accusing conscience. Now we are free to serve the Lord and become like his Son.

But are we also free to disobey God and become self-centered? Are we free to sin as an expression of our new life in Christ? Absolutely not! In fact, the idea is absurd. It supposes that evil can be good, and that wrong can be right. This kind of pseudo freedom actually enslaves rather than liberates. It shackles us to our sinful pride, which says, “I want my way, and I won’t let anyone or anything stop me from getting it.”

## **II. Limitations on Our Freedom (5:13b-15)**

True Christian freedom involves restraints—restraints that help, not hinder, our spiritual growth and service. Paul gives three limitations on our freedom in Galatians 5:13b-15.

### *A. We Are Not Free to Indulge the Sinful Nature (5:13b)*

The first limitation on our freedom is that we are not free to indulge the sinful nature.

Paul states the limitation this way in verse 13b: **“But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.”**

We must not allow our sinful nature to use our newfound freedom as a base of operations. Our sinful nature was nailed to the cross when Christ died to pay for our sin. We see this in verse 24, where Paul says, “Those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires,” Therefore, we should leave it there to die, and not try to remove the nails and allow it to control us again.

The question then is this: Who controls your life? Is it Christ or your sinful nature? Are you bowing before Christ or before self?

You cannot serve both, and you will find real freedom only through obeying Christ and yielding to the Spirit's control in your life. As John Stott says, "Christian freedom is freedom *from* sin, not freedom *to* sin."<sup>3</sup>

*B. We Are Not Free to Exploit Others (5:13c, 15)*

The second limitation on our freedom is that we are not free to exploit others.

Using people to get what we want is an act of the flesh, not of faith. And when we treat others as things, we run the risk of hurting not only others but ourselves also. This is what Paul means in verse 15, **"If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."**

Christian freedom urges us to go a different way. It beckons us to serve one another in love. This is seen in verse 13c, **"Rather, serve one another in love."** This isn't a wishy-washy kind of love based on feelings. Nor is it the sort of love that says, "I'll meet you halfway."

The love Paul speaks about is the love Christ showed when he took our punishment upon himself so we could escape God's wrath and enjoy his grace. This is agape love—sacrificial love. It gives and gives and keeps on giving, even when it receives nothing in return.

My wife's brother and his wife are retiring next month after serving as missionaries in Zimbabwe for 35 years. As you may know, things are very difficult in Zimbabwe right now. President Robert Mugabe has ordered that the houses of some of the poorest people be bulldozed. The people have nowhere to go. It is winter in Zimbabwe and it is very cold. My brother-in-law and his wife are trying to provide blankets for the homeless people.

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<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 140.

Some of their young grandchildren in Columbia, South Carolina, have decided that they want to use their pocket money to help provide blankets to poor, cold, homeless people half a world away. Why are they doing this? Young as they are, they are motivated by agape love—sacrificial love. Agape love gives and gives and keeps on giving, even when it receives nothing in return.

Do you have this kind of love for people? Do you reach out to those around you who cannot pay back your kindness?

True Christian freedom treats people as persons to be served and loved, never as things to be used and abused.

*C. We Are Not Free to Disregard the Needs of Others (5:14)*

The third limitation on our freedom is that we are not free to disregard the needs of others.

The live-and-let-live philosophy of today is foreign to the Christian view of freedom. We are our brother's keepers, and we are called to use our freedom to love others as we love ourselves. Paul puts it this way in verse 14: **“The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”**

Do you care for the needs of others as much as your own? Are you willing to give up some comforts in order to make life better for someone else?

Years ago I heard Stuart Briscoe preach in Cape Town, South Africa. I vividly remember one story he told. Stuart Briscoe was the pastor of a large church in a rather wealthy area of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One Sunday morning during the singing of one of the songs a very scruffy, dirty, bare-footed hippy came into the sanctuary. He wore dirty jeans and a tee-shirt that had lots of holes all over. He probably had not washed in a week. As he walked by one lady, Stuart Briscoe said, even the fur on her coat bristled!

The young man walked up the center aisle and when the song was over, he sat down on the floor and crossed his legs right in front of the pulpit. By this time all eyes were on the young man. People wondered what would be done.

After what seemed like a long time, one of the old, godly elders stood up in his pew. He walked slowly down the center aisle. You could feel the tension in the air. What would the elder do? How would the hippy react?

Finally, the elder reached the hippy. Slowly, he bent down, and sat on the floor next to the hippy, and worshipped together with him.

Do you care for the needs of others as much as your own? Are you willing to give up some comforts in order to make life better for someone else?

Christian freedom was given for us to share liberally, not to possess greedily.

### **III. Guidelines for Our Balance**

Realizing that genuine freedom comes with certain limits is important, but by itself this knowledge is not enough. We also need to know when we should restrain a permissible exercise of our freedom. We are not all equally mature in our faith. Some of us can engage in various activities permitted by Scripture, while others still struggle with the acceptability of those practices.

Bible teacher Dr. J. Vernon McGee tells about a woman in Texas who was an outstanding Bible teacher. One day a dear old saint came up to him and asked, “Do you think she really is a Christian? She uses makeup!” Who in the world ever said that makeup was the test of whether or not a person is a Christian?<sup>4</sup>

There are times when we must apply the brakes to the full exercise of our freedom. Clearly, in my opening illustration, Phil had overstepped the boundary into sin. But how will we know when to apply the brakes?

Romans 14 gives some guidelines that will help us make this decision. The chapter’s historical context involves meat from pagan animal sacrifices. Christians were divided over whether it was

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<sup>4</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Galatians*, Thru the Bible Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 95.



right to buy and eat this meat, so Paul addresses their disagreement. He points out that nothing in God's creation is evil in itself, but because some people don't accept this fact, they falter in their faith when they see fellow Christians eating "unclean" foods.

Paul says in Romans 14:13-14, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if someone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean."

Paul is simply saying that believers need to temper their freedom with love. He conveys this counsel through three timeless principles.

A. *When Our Freedom Could Hurt a Fellow Christian, We Should Yield*

The first principle is that when our freedom could hurt a fellow Christian, we should yield.

Paul says in Romans 14:15: "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died."

Helping our brothers and sisters in Christ is far more important than exercising our freedom to its fullest. Indeed, Christ set us free so we could use our freedom to serve, not destroy. So whenever we think our actions may hinder another Christian's walk with the Lord, we should restrain ourselves.

When I was serving as pastor at my former church, a new family came to me one day, obviously distressed. Another family in our church had invited them to lunch after worship one Sunday. They accepted the invitation. However, the new family was completely taken aback when the host family brought out some wine and made a big deal of their freedom to consume alcohol. The host family's freedom to consume alcohol was a hindrance to another

Christian family's walk with the Lord. The host family should have yielded.

By the way, despite what some teetotalers might say, the use of alcohol is never prohibited in Scripture. After all, Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine (John 2:1-11), and let me assure you that the wine was fermented alcoholic wine. What the Scriptures do forbid is the abuse of alcohol, not the use of alcohol (Ephesians 5:18). There is a very important distinction between the two. The latter is permitted within the bounds of Christian freedom while the former is clearly contrary to our Christian freedom.

But, because you are free, do you flaunt the fact, no matter what? Or do you hold back when love says you must?

*B. When Our Freedom Could Hinder God's Work, We Should Yield*

The second principle is that when our freedom could hinder God's work, we should yield.

"Do not," Paul writes in Romans 14:16-17, "allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Godly living and Christian unity are the sum and substance of God's spiritual kingdom. When we use our freedom in a way that hampers holiness and harmony, we impede the development of God's kingdom.

A year and a half ago, I took my first trip to Mexico to visit our daughter church in Ciudad Victoria. I learned then what many of you know who have already visited Ciudad Victoria. Mexicans have a much higher standard of modesty than most Americans. We were asked to dress modestly so as not to hinder the advancement of the Gospel in Ciudad Victoria. I gladly did so.

Are you using your freedom so that it hinders God's work? Or, are you using your freedom to advance God's kingdom?

*C. When Our Freedom Creates Unrest in Our Consciences, We Should Yield*

The third principle is that when our freedom creates unrest in our consciences, we should yield.

Paul says in Romans 14:22-23: “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”

When we feel uneasy about the morality of a certain practice, we should not do it. The internal unrest may be the Holy Spirit telling us that for us the action is wrong.

Are you doing something you think might not be right? Or do you allow your conscience to guide you in one direction until you are convinced on biblical grounds that you should redirect your steps?

### **Conclusion**

Do you remember the story of Phil and Lana? With whom do you identify?

Are you like Phil, a freedom abuser, or like Lana, a freedom loser, or like her pastor, a freedom protector?

If you are a freedom abuser, you need to slam on the brakes and turn your life back to traveling God’s way.

If you are a freedom loser, you, too, need to apply the brakes and steer your life away from those who have led you astray.

If you are a freedom protector, keep driving forward! We need more people like you to help the rest of us stay on the right road. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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