

**International Sunday School Lesson**  
**Study Notes**  
**February 19, 2017**

**Lesson Text: Galatians 5:1-17**  
**Lesson Title: Freedom in Christ**

**Introduction**

In Galatians 1 and 2, the Apostle Paul defended his apostleship. In chapters 3 and 4, he defended the gospel of justification by faith alone. One of his main points in Galatians 4:21-31, is the story of Abraham's family. The facts of the story are rather straightforward. First, Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac (Galatians 4:22a). Second, these sons were different in origin, one born to Hagar, a slave girl; the other born to Sarah, a free woman (Galatians 4:22b). Third, the births were different circumstances (Galatians 4:23). Ishmael was born "*after the flesh*," that is, according to the normal course of conception and birth. Isaac was born by promise, that is, contrary to the normal course of conception and birth.

Paul seems to have chosen the story of Abraham's family because the Judaizers were so insistent on keeping the law as a basis for right relationship with the Lord. Hagar, the slave woman, represents life under the law, the attempt to be saved by law keeping. Hagar the slave could only produce slave children, and so it is with people who live under the law. They are slaves. They cannot be justified by the law. They cannot be sanctified by the law. The mother of those who have placed their trust in Christ, who are justified by faith alone, is Sarah. That is where our lesson begins today as Paul concludes, "*So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free*" (Galatians 4:31).

**Freedom or Failure (Galatians 5:1-12)**

Verse 1

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free" is the heart and soul of Paul's message to the Galatian believers. "Stand fast" means "keep standing firm, stay where you are." The Galatians had placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ who "made them free." "Free" means they had been liberated from the guilt and bondage of sin. The goal of the redemptive work of Christ is that men be "free." Living under the bondage produced by the law is inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“And be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” implies personal accountability on the part of the Galatians if they move away from grace to the works of law. Although the Judaizers were teaching them and attempting to lure them away from grace to legalism, the ultimate responsibility for not “standing in the liberty” Christ had given them was theirs.

“Entangled” means “to ensnare.” The Galatians were close to being ensnared “with the yoke of bondage.” A “yoke” was normally an instrument used to provide guidance and stability when oxen were plowing a field. Paul used “yoke” in this context in an unfavorable way suggesting restriction from freedom. Paul wanted the Galatians to think of this “yoke” as a yoke of slavery. The Law, like a great heavy yoke around the neck of an ox, causes the ox to bow down and carry a heavy weight. When the “yoke” is removed, the ox stands erect and is free.

Like a yoked ox, Paul knew what it was to carry the weight of the law and be restricted from freedom. If the Galatians failed to “stand firm in the liberty” of Christ, they would be burdened and restricted all their life.

### Verse 2

“Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.”

“Behold” means “pay close attention to what I am about to say.” Paul is bringing up the issue of circumcision. Circumcision is a simple surgical procedure performed once only on males. Circumcision was also a symbol given to Abraham, that he was to pass on to his descendants. It was a symbol of the covenant God made with him.

The Judaizers had twisted the meaning of circumcision and made it part of the gospel and a requirement for salvation. They used circumcision to support their teaching that salvation is by ceremonies; it is by keeping the law. Paul said, “If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.” He was not saying Galatian believers who were circumcised were lost. His words are “if ye be.” The Galatians were not yet there, but they were moving in that direction. Paul was saying if the Galatian believers allowed themselves to be circumcised because they believed it aided in their salvation and standing before God, “Christ shall profit you nothing.”

“Christ shall profit you nothing” means the atoning work of Christ on the cross benefits no one who trusts in law and ceremony for salvation. Any human effort for salvation and righteousness stands between the sinner and Christ (Colossians 3:11).

### Verse 3

“For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.”

“For I testify again” means Paul is strongly issuing a warning to the person who accepts circumcision as part of salvation. “Again” could refer to the previous verse or a previous occasion when Paul had already discussed this with the Galatians.

Any believer who embraced the law by practicing circumcision, would be “a debtor to do the whole law.” That means a believer who believed circumcision was required for salvation could not pick and choose which laws he wanted to obey. He is “a debtor to do the whole law.” But as Paul taught earlier in Galatians, Christians must die to the law to gain life in Christ (Galatians 2:19-20).

People fail to realize the seriousness of believing salvation by works and practicing legalism. If salvation is by works, then one work is not enough. If obedience to man-made rules is a requirement to be right with God, how many man-made rules are required? Paul says the “whole law” must be obeyed and that is impossible.

#### Verse 4

“Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.”

For the second time in as many verses, Paul says, “Christ is become of no effect” unto those who seek righteousness by the works of the law. “Become of no effect” means “to render inoperative.” The seriousness of the doctrinal error of being justified by keeping the law is indicated by its consequences. If “you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.”

What does Paul mean by “fallen from grace?” It does not mean one who possess eternal life can lose it. If the words “eternal life” mean anything, then losing “eternal life” is an impossibility. It is not “eternal” if it can be lost. To “fall from grace” means a person can fall away from the principle of grace as the method of salvation. “Fallen” means “to drop away, driven out of one’s course.” Grace itself is not salvation. It is the means or way to salvation. A person “falls from grace” by embracing legalism and adopting works as a means of being right with God in comparison to grace.

#### Verse 5

“For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.”

In order to support all he has just said, Paul says, “For we,” meaning all Christians, are “waiting for the hope of righteousness by faith.” In other words, Christians have not yet realized perfect righteousness. However, by “faith” we “wait,” not work “for the hope of righteousness.” Our “faith” is in the fact Christ has done everything we need to be “righteous.” “Through the Spirit,” our “hope of righteousness” exists. Keeping the law does not generate hope. Being circumcised does not generate hope. The Holy Spirit gives life and by “faith” we are joined to Christ and need nothing else. So, our “hope” has nothing to do with keeping the law, circumcision, or any other ceremony.

### Verse 6

“For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.”

Paul’s point is “circumcision” or “uncircumcision” does not matter when it comes to salvation and justification. Works do not matter. What matters is “faith which worketh by love.” “Faith” that “worketh” is “active, energetic” faith. It is also a “faith” that bears the fruit of “love.”

Legalists often think they are more spiritual than others because they work harder to please God. How foolish! People who live by grace work harder than legalists because their work is not labor, but love. Legalism is all about the outside. Grace is all about the inside!

### Verse 7

“Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?”

Paul compares the Galatian’s past progress with their present situation. “Ye did run well” reflects the image of an athletic race. While Paul ministered among the Galatians, they had no trouble living their Christian lives by faith. But once he left and the Judaizers began to influence their thinking, their progress turned in the opposite direction.

“Who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth” is a rhetorical question. Both Paul and the Galatian believers knew “who” hindered them regarding personal identity. His question, “Who did hinder you” is actually, “Who do they think they are and who are you to allow this to happen?”

“Truth” in this verse refers to the true gospel by which men are saved (Romans 2:8; 6:17; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). It is serious when anyone causes others to “not obey the truth.”

### Verse 8

“This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you.”

The “persuasion” to which Paul refers are the seductive words the Judaizers were using to draw the Galatians away from grace to the law. The words they were using “cometh not of him that calleth you.” That means God never calls someone to salvation through self-effort (Romans 2:8-9). The false teaching of the Judaizers did not originate in God. God called them to salvation by grace and to live by grace (Galatians 1:6).

#### Verse 9

“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

“Leaven” is a symbol of sin in the Bible. “Leaven” was a substance much like yeast, added to the bread to make it rise. Just a “little” or small amount of leaven would permeate the entire bread dough. Paul’s point is a small amount of false teaching does a whole lot of damage (Matthew 16:6, 12; 1 Corinthians 5:6). Paul does not say “A little lump will unleaven the leaven,” for a little bit of good doctrine introduced in the midst of a lot of false doctrine does not transform false doctrine. It always works the other way.

Legalism influences a congregation of believers and soon “the whole lump” or entire body of Christ is damaged. Legalism must never get a foothold in any church or that church may never recover. Be careful when you allow yourself to sit under preaching and teaching which emphasizes man-made rules, tradition, and opinion, while ignoring grace.

#### Verse 10

“I have confidence in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded: but he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be.”

Although the Galatians were leaning heavily toward the Judaizers position, Paul had “confidence” in his heart the Galatians would not turn away from the truth of the gospel. This was a note of assurance to the Galatians who had gone astray, for the way they would know they were true Christians was they would return to the truth that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. Paul was confident most to whom he wrote were believers and he knew true believers respond to the truth when confronted.

Paul wants “he” or those who were “troubling” the Galatians to “bear” the full weight of God’s “judgment,” whoever they were. Unbelieving legalists, no matter who they are, will be judged by God if they continue to preach works rather than grace for salvation and sanctification.

#### Verse 11-12

“And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased. I would they were even cut off which trouble you.”

Some accused Paul of preaching “circumcision” or a message of law to the Jews and a message of grace to the Gentiles. That was not true. Paul asked, “If I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution?” Paul suffered greatly, as most teachers and preachers do when a Law-free gospel is preached. If Paul really did preach “circumcision,” he would have sided with the Judaizers and avoided all the trouble he was experiencing.

“Then is the offence of the cross ceased” means if Paul preached “circumcision” or law-keeping, he would have been preaching a message the world likes to hear and no one would have persecuted him. Sinful man loves to hear he can save himself and please God by good works and personal merit. It is the message of the cross that offends sinners (Galatians 6:12).

The capstone of Paul’s feelings toward the false teachers is they be “cut off.” Literally, Paul wants them castrated! Paul could get rather plain at times, especially when it came to false teaching. He had no tolerance for false teachers and false doctrine (Romans 16:17-18).

### **Liberty or License (Galatians 5:13-15)**

#### Verse 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.”

Being a Christian means you are free from the Mosaic Law as a way of life. However, being a Christian does not mean you are free to live as you please. “Liberty,” or being free from the law, is not a license to sin.

“Called unto liberty” are three of the most precious words in the Bible. It means the Law has no claim on the believer. The popular imagine of Christianity today is a life of restriction and bondage. Real Christianity is not bondage to anyone or anything. It is grace and freedom in Christ. Paul wanted the Galatians to ignore the call to legalism by the Judaizers and remember they had “been called unto liberty” in Jesus Christ.

While Christian “liberty” is freedom from sin, it is not freedom to sin. That is what Paul taught when he said, “use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh.” “Occasion” means “opportunity.” Freedom from the law should never be used as an opportunity to indulge in sin. Christians are not saved by good works, but rather saved to do good works (Ephesians 2:10).

“But by love serve one another” is the exact opposite of using freedom in Christ as an “occasion” to sin. “Serve” is the Greek word *douleuo* {do-you-o} which means “to be a slave.” All a slave does is serve other people. That is the essence of the Christian life. Grace does not free us to do as we please. Grace frees us to “serve” others. The gospel takes a man from the slavery of Law and sin and makes him a slave of grace and love. The world’s concept of freedom often results in man’s slavery to sin. However, the Christian is free to live according to God’s will because God has done a work of grace in his heart.

#### Verse 14

“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

If the Galatians want to keep the Law, Paul tells them they must “love their neighbor as they love themselves.” When a Christian truly loves others, he fulfills all the moral requirements of the former Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 13:8-10). “Love” is the Greek word *agape* {ag-ah-pay} which means “self-sacrificing love.” “Love” is greater than all the law, for it is the ruling principle of Christian freedom. Such “love” will never come from keeping the law, but from the cross. A person may be very strict in observing the law concerning days, months, and years, but not have love.

#### Verse 15

“But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.”

Having stated true liberty in Christ expresses itself in “love,” Paul issues a warning against the false liberty which is self-serving and harms others. “Bite and devour one another” is the imagery of wild animals attacking and killing one another. They were putting themselves under the Law, “biting and devouring one another.” “Devour” suggests using one another selfishly.” Paul warns them if that is happening, “take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.

### **Flesh or Spirit (Galatians 5:16-17)**

#### Verse 16

“This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

The remedy for legalism and the great incentive to live in the freedom we have in Christ is to “walk in the Spirit.” Walking is a common Old Testament expression for living, for conducting one's life. Paul's point here is let your

walk, let your conduct, be directed and guided by the Holy Spirit. The Galatians were not “walking in the Spirit. They were trying to find their guidance from the Law of Moses. But believers have something far greater than external rules and regulations. No external law or man-made rule can give you the power to live free in Christ. That only comes by the Holy Spirit.

Freedom in Christ means the believer rejects the “lust of the flesh” and lives under the control of the Holy Spirit. “Fulfil” means “perform.” The believer who “walks in the Spirit” will not “perform” or live according to the “lust of the flesh.”

*Question: Will your master be the law, which can only produce the works of the flesh? Or will your master be the Holy Spirit of God which will lead you to your freedom in Christ*

### Verse 17

“For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.”

“For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” describes the inner conflict every believer has between the “Spirit” and the “flesh.” For the Galatians, the “flesh” in this context was their effort to be righteous by the fleshly works of the law and legalism. For all of us, the “flesh” is what we are apart from God’s grace. It includes body, mind, will, and emotions which are all subject to sin. Paul describes this conflict in greater detail in Romans 7:14-25.

The “flesh” and the “Spirit” are “contrary” to one another. “Contrary” means “opposite, opposing one another.” Just as Ishmael (Abraham’s son by Hagar) and Isaac (Abraham’s son by Sarah) were unable to get along, so the “flesh” (old nature) and the Spirit (the new nature) are at war with each other. Paul’s point to the Galatians is the Christian cannot simply overcome the “flesh” by wanting to or working at it from the outside in (Romans 7:15-19).

“So that ye cannot do the things that ye would” means following the law which attempts to make the flesh righteous will only lead the believer to complete frustration. The Christian life is a struggle, a war between the flesh and the Spirit. Paul is not saying there is no victory in the Christian life. He is saying there is no victory to enjoy the freedom we have in Christ by our strength and attempting to obey the law.

### **Conclusion**



In a speech given to the Second Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775, at St. John's Church in Richmond, Virginia, American attorney, Patrick Henry, planter and politician spoke the famous words, "Give me liberty, or give me death." Swayed by the impassioned words of this great patriot, the Revolutionary Convention was moved to arm the American colonies for an inevitable war against Britain.

In like manner, the Apostle Paul dealt with a liberty-or-death issue in the church at Galatia. The legalistic teaching of the Judaizers that keeping the law and circumcision was necessary for salvation, was to Paul a battle that could not be lost. If the Judaizers succeeded, the church would lose her spiritual freedom and forever be in legalist bondage.

The battle still rages today and can only be won by a clear understanding of the freedom we have in Christ and dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit. Obeying the Law and man-made rules does not have the power to produce righteousness. Legalism is helpless against the flesh. It results in more bondage and condemnation.

Enjoy your freedom in Christ!

Amen.