

The Book of Galatians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Freedom to Serve; Walk by the Spirit

Galatians 5:13–26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage turns from defending freedom to describing how freedom is to be lived, and it carries major doctrinal and ethical weight. Paul insists that gospel freedom is freedom to love and serve, never a license for the flesh, and he sets before the church the stark contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. The central command is to walk by the Spirit, and the central warning is that those who practice the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God. The lesson must teach both the necessity of holy living and the Spirit-empowered means by which it is pursued.

The heaviest doctrinal matter, at Galatians 5:19–21, requires careful handling on two fronts. Against antinomian license, Paul makes clear that grace never excuses sin and that a life given over to the works of the flesh forfeits the kingdom. Against the notion of eternal security regardless of how one lives, he warns professing believers themselves that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom. At the same time, the teacher must distinguish the settled, unrepentant practice of the flesh from the genuine struggle of a believer who still battles sin and walks by the Spirit. Holiness is necessary, yet it is the fruit of the Spirit, not a self-made achievement, and the standard is a life directed by the Spirit, not sinless perfection.

Pastorally, this lesson is deeply formative. It names the war that every honest Christian feels and points to the Spirit as the one who wins it in us. Aim to help students stop trying to defeat the flesh by sheer willpower and learn to walk by the Spirit, to long for his fruit more than to merely avoid sin, and to take seriously, without despair, the call to a holy life that flows from belonging to Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, “You were called to freedom ... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (5:13). What is Christian freedom actually for, and why is it not a license to do whatever we want?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul anticipates a dangerous misreading of his gospel. If we are free from the law, someone will say, then we may live however we please. Paul cuts this off at once: “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Freedom is real, but it has a direction. We were freed not to indulge ourselves but to love.

Explain what freedom is for. The world tends to define freedom as the absence of all constraint, the ability to do whatever we want. Paul defines it as liberation to become what God made us to be, which is people who love. We were set free from sin and self in order to be free for God and neighbor. Freedom that serves only the self is not the freedom Christ won; it is a new slavery to the flesh.

Show how love fulfills the law. Paul says the whole law is fulfilled in one command: love your neighbor as yourself. The freedom of the gospel does not lower the moral bar; it raises it and supplies a new motive. What the law could only demand from the outside, the Spirit now produces from within, as love.

Warn against the alternative Paul names. If we use our freedom for the flesh, we end up biting and devouring one another, and being consumed. Self-serving freedom destroys community. Love-serving freedom builds it. The choice between them shapes the whole life of the church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Freedom directed toward love and service, not self-indulgence (Galatians 5:13)
- Christian freedom as liberation to become who God made us to be
- Love of neighbor as the fulfillment of the law (Galatians 5:14)
- Self-serving freedom as a new slavery that destroys community

Discussion Prompts

- What is Christian freedom actually for?
- How does love fulfill the law without lowering its standard?
- How does self-serving freedom destroy community?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul warns against turning grace into an excuse for the flesh. Where are you most tempted to use your freedom in Christ, or the promise of grace, as a cover for indulging sin or avoiding the hard work of love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Paul's warning into personal honesty. The flesh is endlessly creative at hijacking good things, and it will gladly use even the doctrine of grace as a cover for sin. Some hear the message of freedom and quietly conclude that they can indulge themselves and presume on God's forgiveness.

Help students spot this tendency in themselves. It can sound like, grace covers it, so it does not really matter, or, I am free, so I do not have to. The flesh uses the language of grace and

freedom to excuse what grace actually came to defeat. Naming this self-deception honestly is the first step to refusing it.

Distinguish presumption from true grace. Real grace not only forgives sin but frees us from its grip and teaches us to renounce it (Titus 2:11–12). A grace that leaves us comfortable in our sin is not the grace of the gospel but a counterfeit. The freed person does not ask how much they can get away with; they ask how they can love.

Call for repentance where needed. Invite students to consider any area where they have been using grace or freedom as a cover for indulging the flesh or avoiding the costly work of love, and to turn from it, asking the Spirit to make their freedom serve love instead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The flesh using grace and freedom as a cover for sin
- Presumption on grace distinguished from true grace
- Grace that frees from sin and teaches us to renounce it (Titus 2:11–12)
- Repentance from using freedom to avoid the work of love

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to use grace as an excuse for the flesh?
- How does true grace differ from presumption?
- What would it look like to turn that freedom toward love?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul commands, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16). What does it mean to walk by the Spirit in daily life, and how does walking in the Spirit actually overcome the pull of the flesh?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul gives the central command of the passage: “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Notice that the primary strategy against sin is not mainly a frontal assault on the flesh by willpower, but walking in the Spirit. As we are filled with and led by the Spirit, the desires of the flesh lose their controlling power.

Explain what walking by the Spirit means. Walking pictures ordinary, step-by-step daily living, not occasional spiritual highs. To walk by the Spirit is to live in continual dependence on him, yielding to his leading, drawing on his power, setting our minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5–6). It is a moment-by-moment reliance, not a one-time decision.

Show how this overcomes the flesh. Sin is rarely defeated by merely trying not to sin; that often increases our preoccupation with it. The flesh is overcome as the Spirit fills us with a greater love and a stronger desire. We crowd out the darkness by walking in the light, replacing the cravings of the flesh with the leading and fruit of the Spirit.

Make it practical. Walking by the Spirit takes shape in concrete habits: prayer, the word, worship, fellowship, and a continual turning to God through the day. These are not ways of earning God's favor but ways of keeping company with the Spirit, so that his life increasingly governs ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Walking by the Spirit as the primary means of overcoming the flesh (Galatians 5:16)
- Walking as continual, step-by-step dependence on the Spirit
- Sin overcome by the Spirit's greater power and desire, not willpower alone
- Practical habits as ways of keeping company with the Spirit

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to walk by the Spirit day to day?
- Why is walking in the Spirit more effective than fighting sin by willpower?
- What habits help you keep company with the Spirit?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul describes a real war: "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (5:17). Where do you feel this inner conflict between the flesh and the Spirit most intensely, and how do you tend to respond when the battle is fierce?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul describes a genuine war: "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh ... to keep you from doing the things you want to do." This honest acknowledgment is a comfort to struggling believers. The inner conflict they feel is not a sign that something is wrong with them; it is the normal experience of a Christian in whom the Spirit now wars against the flesh.

Help students understand the combatants. The flesh is the old, self-centered nature that wants its own way; the Spirit is God himself at work within. Before conversion there was no such war, because the flesh ruled unopposed. The very presence of the battle is evidence that the Spirit has taken up residence and is contending for us.

Address how we tend to respond when the battle is fierce. Some despair, concluding that the struggle means they are not truly saved. Others give up and give in. Others try to fight in their

own strength and grow exhausted. Paul points to a better way, neither despair nor surrender nor self-reliance, but leaning into the Spirit who is fighting for us.

Encourage perseverance in the conflict. The war is real and lifelong, but the outcome is not in doubt for those who keep walking in the Spirit. Invite students to name where they feel the conflict most sharply and to bring that very battlefield to the Spirit, asking for his power rather than relying on their own.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ongoing war between flesh and Spirit in the believer (Galatians 5:17)
- The inner conflict as evidence of the Spirit's indwelling, not a sign of lost salvation
- Wrong responses to the battle: despair, surrender, and self-reliance
- Leaning into the Spirit who contends for us

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you feel the conflict between flesh and Spirit most intensely?
- Why is the very presence of this battle actually encouraging?
- How do you tend to respond when the battle is fierce?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul calls the Spirit's work "fruit," singular, made up of love, joy, peace, and the rest (5:22–23). What does it teach us that these qualities are described as fruit grown by the Spirit rather than achievements we manufacture, and how does that shape the way we pursue them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul calls the Spirit's work "fruit," and the word choice matters. He does not call these qualities the achievements of the flesh or the works of the believer, but the fruit of the Spirit. Fruit grows organically from a living plant; it is the natural outcome of a healthy tree, not something manufactured or bolted on. Love, joy, peace, and the rest grow in us as the Spirit lives in us.

Note that fruit is singular. Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is, not are, suggesting a single cluster of character that grows together. These are not nine separate skills to master one at a time, but the unified character of Christ taking shape in a person. Where the Spirit is truly at work, the whole cluster begins to grow.

Draw the implication for how we pursue these qualities. We do not produce fruit by gritting our teeth and trying harder to be patient or loving. We cultivate the conditions in which the Spirit grows fruit, by abiding in Christ, walking in the Spirit, and staying rooted in the means of grace. Jesus said it plainly: apart from him we can do nothing, but the branch that abides bears much fruit (John 15:4–5).

Free students from a works mentality even here. The goal is not to manufacture Christlike character to impress God, but to abide in Christ and let his Spirit produce his character in us. Our part is to stay connected to the Vine; the fruit is his to grow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fruit of the Spirit as grown by the Spirit, not manufactured by us (Galatians 5:22–23)
- Fruit as singular: a unified cluster of Christlike character
- Bearing fruit through abiding in Christ (John 15:4–5)
- Cultivating conditions for growth rather than producing fruit by effort

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that these qualities are fruit rather than achievements?
- How does abiding in Christ produce the fruit of the Spirit?
- How does this free us from a works mentality about godly character?

Question 6

Student Question:

Looking honestly at the fruit of the Spirit, which quality is God clearly cultivating in you through your current circumstances, and how might you cooperate with his work rather than resist it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to discern the Spirit's present work in them. God often grows a particular fruit through particular circumstances. A difficult coworker becomes the soil for patience; a season of loss becomes the soil for peace; a strained relationship becomes the soil for kindness. The very situations we wish to escape are often the places the Spirit is cultivating his fruit.

Help students reframe their circumstances. Instead of asking only how to get out of a hard situation, they can ask what the Spirit might be growing in them through it. This does not minimize real difficulty, but it gives suffering a redemptive shape, turning trials into the training ground of Christlike character (Romans 5:3–5).

Address the temptation to resist. We often fight the very process by which the Spirit forms us, resenting the difficult person or circumstance that is, in fact, the chisel in the sculptor's hand. Cooperating with the Spirit means yielding to his work rather than resisting it, even when it is uncomfortable.

Move toward concrete cooperation. Invite each student to name the fruit they sense the Spirit cultivating right now and one way they could cooperate with that work this week, perhaps by responding to a hard situation with the very quality the Spirit is trying to grow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Spirit cultivating specific fruit through specific circumstances
- Trials as the training ground of Christlike character (Romans 5:3–5)
- The temptation to resist the Spirit's forming work
- Cooperating with the Spirit by yielding rather than resisting

Discussion Prompts

- Which fruit is God cultivating in you through your circumstances?
- How might your current difficulty be soil for that fruit?
- What is one way you could cooperate with his work this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says, "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (5:24). What does it mean to have crucified the flesh, and how is this both something already true of believers and something we must keep doing daily?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul states a settled fact about Christians: "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." To belong to Christ is to have decisively renounced the rule of the flesh. In coming to Christ, united with him in his death, we put the old self to death and turned from a life governed by sinful cravings.

Hold together the done and the ongoing. On one hand, this crucifixion is an accomplished reality; it describes a decisive break that has already happened for everyone who belongs to Christ. On the other hand, Scripture also calls us to keep putting the flesh to death daily (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). The decisive death is worked out in ongoing mortification, as we continually say no to the flesh we have already, in principle, crucified.

Explain the nature of crucifixion as a picture. Crucifixion is deliberate, painful, and final; it is not a gentle taming of the flesh but its execution. Yet the flesh, though crucified, still struggles, the way a condemned thing fights against its end. So we must keep driving the nails, refusing the flesh its old authority over us.

Encourage students with the logic of belonging. Because we belong to Christ, the flesh no longer has the right to rule us. We put it to death not in order to belong to Christ, but because we already do. Our daily mortification flows from a settled identity, not toward an uncertain one.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Crucifixion of the flesh as a settled reality for those who belong to Christ (Galatians 5:24)

- The decisive death worked out in daily mortification (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5)
- Crucifixion as deliberate, painful, and final, not a gentle taming
- Putting the flesh to death because we belong to Christ, not in order to belong

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to have crucified the flesh?
- How is this both already done and a daily calling?
- How does belonging to Christ change the flesh's authority over you?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul urges, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit" (5:25). What does keeping in step with the Spirit look like in the practical rhythm of your daily life, and where are you tempted to run ahead of him or lag behind?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul adds a memorable image: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." The phrase suggests marching in formation, matching our pace to the Spirit's, neither charging ahead nor falling behind. Having received life from the Spirit, we are to walk in time with him through every day.

Help students picture both failures of step. We run ahead of the Spirit when we act in our own strength, force outcomes, or rush into things he has not led. We lag behind when we resist his prompting, delay obedience, or grow spiritually sluggish. Keeping in step means a responsive, attentive walk that follows his lead in real time.

Make it practical. Keeping in step with the Spirit involves listening for his promptings through the word and conscience, obeying promptly when he leads, and maintaining the unhurried attentiveness that notices his work. It is less about dramatic guidance and more about a daily, moment-by-moment responsiveness to God.

Invite honest self-assessment. Ask students whether they tend to run ahead of the Spirit or lag behind him, and what keeping in step would look like for them this week. The aim is a walk that is neither anxious self-effort nor passive drift, but steady companionship with the Spirit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Keeping in step with the Spirit as a responsive, attentive walk (Galatians 5:25)
- Running ahead through self-reliance and forcing outcomes
- Lagging behind through delayed obedience and spiritual sluggishness
- Daily responsiveness to the Spirit's leading

Discussion Prompts

- What does keeping in step with the Spirit look like in your daily life?
- Do you tend to run ahead of him or lag behind?
- How could you walk more in step with him this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul lists the works of the flesh and warns, "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (5:19-21). How does this sober warning rule out both the idea that grace gives us license to sin and the idea that we are saved no matter how we live, while still distinguishing the settled practice of the flesh from the believer's ongoing struggle against sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question carries the heaviest doctrinal weight of the lesson, and it must be handled with both seriousness and pastoral care. Paul lists the works of the flesh and then issues a grave warning: "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." He says he had warned them before and warns them again. This is not a minor aside; it is a solemn statement about who will and will not share in final salvation.

Use this text against antinomian license first. Some twist grace into a permission slip for sin, imagining that because we are free and forgiven, how we live no longer matters. Paul demolishes that idea. A life given over to the works of the flesh, sexual immorality, idolatry, hatred, strife, drunkenness, and the rest, leads not to the kingdom but away from it. Grace is never a license to sin; it is the power to be done with sin. Holiness is not optional decoration on the Christian life; it is the path of those who are truly led by the Spirit.

Use this text also against the idea of eternal security regardless of how one lives. Notice that Paul issues this warning to the churches, to professing believers, not merely to outsiders. He does not say, this could never apply to you because you once believed. He warns the very people of God that a life of practicing the flesh forfeits the inheritance. This means salvation is not a possession we keep no matter how we live; it is preserved as we walk by the Spirit and put the flesh to death. To live in the works of the flesh is to abandon the way that leads to the kingdom.

Now guard against a crushing misreading by distinguishing practice from struggle. Paul speaks of those who do such things, that is, those who practice them as a settled way of life, who give themselves over to the flesh without repentance. He is not saying that a single sin, or the ongoing struggle of a believer who battles the flesh and grieves over failure, severs a person from the kingdom. The honest Christian who still sins but fights sin, repents, and walks by the Spirit is not described here. The warning falls on the unrepentant practice of the flesh, not on the wounded conscience of the one who is striving against it. The mark of a child of God is not

sinless perfection but the direction of the life: walking by the Spirit, putting the flesh to death, bearing his fruit.

End by holding holiness and grace together. We are saved by grace through faith, and that very grace produces a transformed life. The same Spirit who assures us we are God's children also leads us away from the works of the flesh and grows in us the fruit of Christ. Help students take the warning with full seriousness, examining whether their lives are marked by the practice of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit, while resting in the assurance God gives to all who walk with him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Those who practice the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom (Galatians 5:19–21)
- Against antinomian license: grace is power over sin, not permission to sin
- Against eternal security regardless of life: the warning is addressed to believers themselves
- Salvation preserved through walking by the Spirit and putting the flesh to death
- The settled, unrepentant practice of sin distinguished from the believer's struggle and repentance
- The direction of the life, not sinless perfection, as the mark of God's child

Discussion Prompts

- How does this warning rule out treating grace as a license to sin?
- Why is it significant that Paul warns believers, not just outsiders?
- How do we distinguish the practice of the flesh from the struggle against it?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. Paul calls believers to walk by the Spirit and bear his fruit. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to keep in step with the Spirit and let his fruit grow in a particular area of your life.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers the passage into a single, hopeful direction: walk by the Spirit and bear his fruit. After the seriousness of the warning, the lesson should end not in fear but in forward motion, with students leaning into the Spirit who alone can produce the harvest God desires.

Help them choose one concrete area. Keeping in step with the Spirit this week might mean cultivating a particular fruit in a specific relationship, putting to death a specific work of the flesh, or building one practical habit of walking with the Spirit. The aim is one clear, Spirit-dependent step, not a vague resolve to do better.

Reinforce the means. Remind students that the fruit grows as we abide in Christ, walk in the Spirit, and stay rooted among God's people. We do not manufacture the harvest by willpower; we keep company with the Spirit and let him grow it. Their effort is real, but it is the effort of dependence, not self-reliance.

Close in hope. The Spirit who began his work will bring it to harvest. Send students home not weighed down by the war with the flesh but encouraged by the Helper who fights for them, confident that as they walk with him, the beautiful fruit of Christ will keep growing in their lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Walking by the Spirit and bearing fruit as the forward call of the passage
- Spirit-dependent effort rather than self-reliant willpower
- Fruit grown through abiding in Christ and life among God's people
- Hope grounded in the Spirit who brings his work to harvest

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way you will keep in step with the Spirit this week?
- Which fruit do you most want the Spirit to grow, and where?
- How does dependence on the Spirit change the way you pursue change?