

The Book of Galatians

Lesson 11: Freedom to Serve; Walk by the Spirit -- Galatians 5:13-26

Give a child a day with no rules and no bedtime, and you might expect pure delight. More often you get a meltdown. It turns out that freedom without wisdom is not freedom at all; it is just a different kind of misery. Paul has spent four and a half chapters defending the freedom Christ won for us, and now he turns to answer the obvious question: free for what? If we are not under the law, does that mean anything goes?

His answer is striking. You were called to freedom, he says, but do not use that freedom as a launching pad for the flesh. Instead, through love, serve one another. Real freedom is not the absence of all constraint; it is being set loose to become who God made us to be, and that means a life of love. The whole law, Paul says, is summed up in a single command: love your neighbor as yourself. Freedom and love are not opposites. Freedom is for love.

Then Paul names the great conflict that runs through every Christian's life: the war between the flesh and the Spirit. The flesh, our old self-centered nature, pulls one direction; the Spirit pulls another. Paul does not pretend this battle is easy, but he tells us how to win it, not by gritting our teeth under the law, but by walking, step by step, in the Spirit. Walk by the Spirit, he promises, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

And he shows us what each path produces. The works of the flesh are ugly and divisive, and Paul warns, with great seriousness, that those who give themselves over to such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is beautiful: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, the very character of Christ growing in us. As we read, ask honestly which harvest is growing in your life, and lean hard into the Spirit who alone can grow the good.

Group Discussion: Paul says we were called to freedom, but adds, "through love serve one another" (5:13). How does true Christian freedom express itself in serving others, and how is that different from the world's idea of freedom as doing whatever we please?

Personal Reflection: Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (5:22-23). Which of these is the Spirit most clearly growing in you right now, and which one feels most absent and in need of his work?

Read Galatians 5:13-26

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 8:5–14, setting the mind on the Spirit and putting to death the deeds of the body; Ephesians 5:3–11, the warning that the impure have no inheritance in the kingdom; Colossians 3:5–17, putting to death the old and putting on the new; John 15:1–8,

abiding in Christ to bear much fruit; 1 John 3:4–10, the contrast between practicing sin and practicing righteousness.