

One Another

Lesson 5: Serve One Another in Love -- Galatians 5:13-15

Imagine a prisoner who has spent his whole life behind iron bars. He knows nothing but the gray walls and the clang of the lock. Then one morning the door swings open, and a man with nail-scarred hands says, "You are free. Walk out." The prisoner steps into the sunlight, blinking, and a strange thought rises in him. If I am free, then I can do whatever I please. No more rules. No more master. And he is half right and half terribly wrong. He is free, yes, but not free to ruin himself all over again. He has been set free for something, not just from something. That is exactly the danger Paul is guarding against in Galatia.

The Galatian Christians had been rescued from the slavery of trying to earn God's favor through the works of the Law. Paul has spent four chapters defending their freedom in Christ, insisting that we are justified not by law-keeping but through faith in Jesus, expressed in obedient surrender to him. And then, just as he reaches the summit of that argument, he turns and plants a warning sign at the edge of the cliff. "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love." Freedom, it turns out, has a shape. And the shape is a servant.

It is a stunning sentence. The same gospel that frees us from slavery hands us a towel and points us toward our brother. The Greek word Paul uses for serve is the word for the work of a slave. We were freed from one kind of slavery only to choose another, the glad slavery of love. This is not a contradiction; it is the genius of the gospel. We do not serve to earn anything, for that account is already settled in Christ. We serve because we have been so loved that love now overflows. Liberty in Christ does not look like a man doing whatever he wants. It looks like Jesus kneeling with a basin.

Then Paul says something that should make every congregation grow quiet. He warns that if we bite and devour one another, we will be consumed by one another. He is picturing wild animals tearing at each other until nothing is left. That is what happens when freedom curdles into selfishness, when the people of God turn their liberty into a weapon against their own family. The whole Law, Paul says, is fulfilled in one command: love your neighbor as yourself. So here is the question this lesson sets before us. Will we use our freedom to feed our flesh and feed on one another, or will we use it to serve one another in love?

Group Discussion: When our culture hears the word "freedom," it usually means the right to do whatever I want without anyone telling me no. How is the freedom Paul describes here, freedom that expresses itself in serving one another, both like and radically unlike that popular idea?

Personal Reflection: Where in your life right now are you most tempted to treat your Christian liberty as permission to please yourself rather than as a calling to serve others? Bring that honestly before the Lord as you begin.

Read Galatians 5:13–15

Study Questions

1. Paul says, “You were called to be free” (v. 13), yet the whole letter has insisted we are not saved by keeping the Law. From what has the gospel set us free, and how did we come to share in that freedom in Christ?
2. Paul warns against using freedom “to indulge the flesh.” Where have you quietly used your liberty in Christ as an excuse to please yourself rather than to serve others? Name one concrete area.
3. Paul commands us to “serve one another humbly in love,” using a word that means the work of a slave. Why would the gospel that frees us from slavery then call us to become servants of one another, and how is this glad slavery different from the bondage we were rescued from?
4. Think about the people in your congregation you find it easiest to overlook. What would it look like this week to actually take the lower place and serve one of them, expecting nothing in return?
5. Paul says, “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 14). How can loving our neighbor be said to fulfill the whole Law, and what does that teach us about what God has wanted from his people all along?

6. Honestly measure your love for fellow Christians by the standard “as yourself.” Where do you guard, excuse, and provide for yourself far more readily than you do for your brothers and sisters in Christ?
7. Paul warns, “If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (v. 15). What does this vivid picture of wild animals tell us about the destructive power of conflict within the body of Christ?
8. Where have you participated in “biting and devouring,” whether through sharp words, gossip, a critical spirit, or quiet grudges, within your church family? What would repentance look like?
9. Hold together the two halves of this passage: the freedom we are given in Christ and the call to serve one another in love. How does our shared life in the one body, into which we were baptized, keep Christian freedom from collapsing into selfish license on one side or joyless law-keeping on the other?
10. Look back across Galatians 5:13–15 as a whole: called to freedom, freedom expressed in loving servanthood, the warning against devouring one another. Name one specific way you sense Jesus calling you to grow through this passage, and what you will do about it.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 13:12–17, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet and tells them to do as he has done; Philippians 2:3–8, where Christ empties himself and takes the form of a servant, and we are to count others more significant than ourselves; Mark 10:42–45, where the Son of Man comes not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom; 1 Peter 2:16, where we are to live as free people, yet not using our freedom as a cover-up for evil, but as servants of God; Romans 13:8–10, where love is the fulfilling of the law.