



LESSON 12: “What is Christian Freedom?” **Date:** December 7, 2014

TEXT: Galatians 5:13-26

INTRODUCTION

Today, many people have a flawed understanding of what constitutes personal freedom, and it is no surprise that some believers have followed suit. The thinking goes like this: to be truly human is to be free to choose one’s own path; what liberates humanity is to be free from restraints that dictate how one should live.

Such an idea of personal freedom, however, is obviously simplistic and impossible on several levels. In *The Reason for God*,¹ author Tim Keller explains three problems with that view of personal freedom.

First, it is naïve about the complexity of the human heart. People have lots of wants, and they often contradict each other. For example, people often want to eat whatever they like, but they also want good health. In that scenario, contrary to their professed understanding of what personal freedom is, they have to decide which of those wants is the liberating one and which one will bring them into bondage. This is true in regards to diet, vocations, hobbies, sports, and one’s morality/spirituality—freedom is not the absence of restrictions, but the presence of the right restrictions.

Second, the above view of personal freedom is naïve about the complexity of motivation. We have hundreds of choices every day, usually between good options—why do we choose the ones we do? Every person has an ultimate value, what the Bible often calls an idol. We all believe that if we could just attain that “one thing” (e.g., money, status, etc.) we would find freedom. The ironic trap is that unless that one thing is God, the object of our pursuit ends up controlling us (cf. Romans 1:18-31).

Third, this libertine view of personal freedom is naïve about the fabric of reality. Reality is like a fabric—there is a pattern, a design to reality that must be honored or the fabric tears or unravels. We can illustrate this by considering a car’s designer manual. The “rules” in that manual (i.e., change the oil every 3,000 miles) aren’t meant to deceive, scam, or oppress the car owner or just keep him busy; rather, it provides instruction on how to maximize the vehicle’s potential. Similarly, a fish

is designed for water, not for land—that is a restriction. If it were to cast off that restriction in its pursuit and practice of personal freedom, it would be tragic. But if it honors its design, it is free to do all it was designed to do. So it is likewise true for humanity—human flourishing will be known only if we implement the right restrictions in order to honor our design.

So, in summary, real freedom is not doing what we most want to do. Real freedom is knowing which of the things we most want to do is siding with what we were designed to do. Real freedom is finding the right restrictions, and that is why Jesus says, “If you hold to My teaching...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. ... [and] if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:31-32, 36; contrast with v. 34).

As we have seen, the book of Galatians is a book about freedom. Paul’s concern in Galatians 2:4 was that his personal freedom was being attacked, and he spent the entirety of Galatians 4:22-31 contrasting the freedom of Christianity with the spiritual bondage of legalistic Judaism. Galatians 5:1 rings with triumphant liberty, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery,” and verses 13 echoes, “You were called to freedom, brothers” (cf. 2:4; 3:23; 4:1-2, 7, 8-9). Indeed, Paul wants all believers to enjoy the freedom that is theirs in Christ!

And yet, in agreement with Keller, Paul recognizes that such freedom must be properly restricted and directed in order for it to be truly liberating. He has already argued throughout this letter that true personal freedom is only discovered through the gospel of God’s grace accepted by faith. Now Paul begins to explain how that freedom is enjoyed in the daily experience of the Christian life, and as he does so, he educates us concerning the right restrictions and motivation of Christian freedom. If believers understand and honor their design as “Christians” (i.e., little Christs) in their practice of gospel-freedom, then they will be “free indeed.” ***Every Christian must appropriately understand and observe Christian freedom.***

If Galatians has been called the “Magna Carta of Christian Liberty” and the “Christian Declaration of Independence,” then Galatians 5:13-26 is its preamble. To help us correctly understand and observe Christian freedom, so that we might be “free indeed,” we will consider four main points in this passage.

THE EXPLANATION OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (vv. 13-15)²

Up to this point in his epistle, Paul has focused on the positional aspect of Christian freedom—that we are free from the requirements of the Mosaic Law, that we are free from a religion of “do” and “don’t do,” that we are no longer under the bondage of an external code of conduct. Now, Paul begins to consider the practical implications of Christian freedom—what it means for our daily Christian experience.³ To trace Paul’s explanation in verses 13-15, we’ll ask and answer two questions.

1. *What is Christian freedom? (v. 13)*

In verse 13, Paul clearly defines what the central focus is (and is not) of true Christian freedom.

a. *It is not an opportunity for fleshly indulgence—a focus on self/individual.*

Paul writes first, “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.” The word “opportunity” literally refers to “a base or circumstance from which other action becomes possible, such as the starting-point or base of operations for an expedition...a set of convenient circumstances for carrying out some purpose.”⁴ Paul is commanding us against using our Christian freedom as a “base of operation” from which we launch into fleshly behavior. In other words, it should never be used as a ticket, empowering us to do whatever our flesh desires.

Christian liberty has long been touted as an excuse for all manner of questionable indulgences. Originally perhaps, Christian freedom was used to excuse “gray area” behavior that had traditionally (but for good reason) been considered un-Christian and ungodly. Today, such freedom is used to justify clearly unbiblical behavior like sexual impurity, homosexuality, and various expressions of worldliness. Indeed, “freedom in Christ” has become a “base of operations” that condones and activates all kinds of behavior that one could never imagine Christ engaging in.




How might such fleshly misuses of Christian freedom be expressed today? (1) “You can’t tell me what to do, since I’m free to make my own decisions.” (2) “I don’t want to be a legalist.” (3) “You don’t know my heart; that’s more important.” (4) “You can’t judge me.” (5) “I know I’m saved and will be forgiven, so it’s okay to do it.” (6) etc.

b. *It is an opportunity for loving service—a focus on others/mutual.*


Against such a self-centered misunderstanding of Christian freedom is Paul’s second statement in verse 13, “but through love serve one another” (cf. 6:2). At its very heart, on its fundamental level, Christian freedom is focused on others, not ourselves. This is unmistakably clear in this verse: “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but [instead, use your freedom as an opportunity to] serve one another through love.” Rather than being “a base of operations” for the selfish practice of personal preferences, Christian freedom is to be “a base of operations” for the loving service of others.

Christian freedom has long been hijacked in its interpretation and viewed through an individualistic lens. In other words, Christians say (or at least think), “I’m free to make my own decision in such-an-such an area. You can’t tell me what to do or how to live my life—I’m free in Christ, and that is all that matters.” While Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10 do indeed allow for diversity in some individual Christian practices, this passage nonetheless reaffirms Christ’s goal for the freedom that He gives to His people. His goal is that it be used to lovingly serve each other.


This is a tremendously relevant point that simplifies many concerns that arise in the practice of Christian liberty. Rather than thinking, “What do I want to do?” this passage plainly teaches us that our thinking should be, “How can I lovingly serve my brothers and sisters?” If that thinking prevailed in the local body of Christ, so many tensions and hurts would be altogether avoided. And please notice again—this isn’t just a wise application; this is clear biblical teaching. You and I are supposed to be focused on lovingly serving one another in our daily experience of Christian freedom.

 What is the point of Paul using the word “serve” (Gk. *doulos*—“to be a slave to”) to describe how we ought to relate to one another as free people “in Christ”? See next paragraph.


In fact, this passage actually takes this admonition a step further by strategically employing the particular Greek verb *doulos* (not *diakonos* from which we get our word deacon). Although translated here as “serve,” the Greek verb literally means “to be a slave to,” and its root has already been used close to ten times in this epistle. Paul has employed this word primarily to refer to a person’s destructive bondage to the Law and sin (cf. 4:7, 8, 9, 25; 5:1). Here, however, Paul introduces an alternative and desirable form of bondage—the bondage of mutual love. The intended connection cannot be overstated, and it wouldn’t have been missed by the original reader—we have been freed from slavery to the Law and sin, and freed to mutually serve one another in love. No longer can we consider our freedom individualistically and selfishly; we must view it mutually and corporately.

 How does the understanding that we are in bondage to one another to serve one another in love change the way you think about your daily Christian experience? Discussion

Is this not exactly how Christ operated? As God, He is the most free individual, and He “invented” or rather “purchased” Christian freedom for us—and He used His freedom, not to indulge His preferences and pleasures, but to lovingly serve those around Him (cf. Mark 10:45; Matthew 14:12-16; Philippians 2:5-7).

 Explain how Christ illustrated this others-focused concept of Christian freedom in Matthew 14:12-16? Discussion

What we are learning here, then, is that others are the primary focus of Christian freedom, serving them is the paramount goal of Christian freedom, and love is the principle motivation of Christian freedom.

 Suggest some scenarios in the Christian experience and consider how this understanding of Christian liberty would apply. (1) A Christian student’s parents may not want him to go to a movie theater. Because Christian freedom is not about him, but others, he serves them in love by graciously submitting to them (cf. Luke 2:41-52). That is not a fun or popular decision, but again, Christian freedom is not about him, but others. (2) A Christian family feels strongly about a particular standard that they have adopted based upon biblical principles (perhaps about music styles, vacation locations, dress guidelines, college choices, etc.). Rather than making it a regular conversation among other church families, looking down upon those who disagree or don’t get it and clique-ing off with those who do, they serve their entire church family (including their “opponents”) in every way they can in a genuine spirit of love. For, after all, spiritual freedom produces the fruit of patience and kindness (v. 22), not the works of “enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions” (v. 20). (3) A believer moves to a new location and is looking for a church home. What should be more important to him—a church environment that meets his needs and fits his preferences, or a body that he can lovingly serve? (4) When you “go to church” on Wednesday night, how might your focus be “fleshly” and individualistic? How could it become more others-centered, serving them in love?

2. Why is Christian freedom important? (vv. 14-15)

Having given us a description of Christian freedom, Paul now explains why that understanding is so important.

a. Viewed mutually, it fulfills the law (v. 14).

Remember that we said in Lesson 11 that God’s standard has never changed—that before, during, and after the Mosaic Law, God’s standard has always been perfect holiness, both in outward obedience and inward attitude? Well, when viewed mutually or corporately as Paul has just prescribed, Christian liberty fulfills that moral or ethical law of God—it accomplishes His will and pleases His holy standard (cf. 1 Timothy 1:5).

Paul writes here, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (v. 14). In contrast to merely conforming oneself externally to a standard (i.e., the Mosaic Law), the freedom of grace implants (Romans 5:5) and instructs (1 Thessalonians 4:9) Christian love within the believer’s heart (cf. Jeremiah 31:33). That attribute, by itself, is sufficient to direct the Christian into fulfillment of the entire moral law of God. Not only does “love” summarize that entire law (cf. Matthew 22:37-40; Romans 13:9), but it also accomplishes or completes it (the meaning here). In a twist of irony, what the bondage of adherence to an external standard could never accomplish (cf. 3:10-12—the Mosaic Law could never bring us into conformity with God’s moral law), the bondage of loving service can! In other words, it is not the bondage to the Mosaic Law, but the bondage of mutual love that fulfills God’s moral law. It is this right restriction of lovingly serving each other that accomplishes the standard of God and provokes the pleasure of God—that is real freedom! It is no wonder then, that Jesus called this “yoke [a necessary restriction]...easy” and this “burden...light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

But this is a radically counter-cultural concept. Whereas Scripture commands us to love God and love others (cf. Matthew 22:37-40), and never exhorts us to love ourselves (instead, it takes for granted that we already do that—cf. Ephesians 5:29), society’s incessant sermon is to love yourself. That is absolutely contradictory to true Christian freedom! The liberty of Jesus is that when we “lose” our life—that is, when deny ourselves and spend ourselves living for others and for Him—we “will find it” (Matthew 16:24-26).

The Bible encourages us to “fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture” (James 2:10) and to “fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1; cf. John 13:34). The only way to fulfill that law is by “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). Paul writes in Romans 13:8 and 10, “The one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”


b. Viewed individually, it fractures relationships (v. 15).

When we treat Christian freedom individually, through a self-centered perspective, then we are in danger of verse 15—“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”⁵ Again, notice that Christian liberty is not primarily expressed in the context of an individual believer’s Christian experience, but in the context of the local church community (i.e., “one another” bookends this passage in verses 13, 15 and verse 26). When we fail to bring forth the liberating “fruit of the Spirit” (vv. 22-23), we don’t just hurt ourselves—we end up hurting those around us (cf. vv. 19-21a).

Illustration:⁶ “I have an extra day off this week,” Carl told his wife as he walked into the kitchen. “I think I’ll use it to fix Jenna’s bike and then take Benny on that museum trip he’s been talking about.” “Fixing a bike and visiting a museum hardly sound like exciting ways to spend a day off,” his wife replied. Carl smiled and said, “It is exciting *if you love your kids!*”

Application: Freedom in Christ according to the Bible is much different than what we are often taught concerning Christian liberty. It exhorts us to choose the right restrictions—that is, rejecting our fleshly and self-serving focus—in order to know the greater and more rewarding freedom of serving others and thereby fulfilling the will of God.

But you can also be sure of this—such a perspective on Christian liberty will not seem free unless your Christian “faith [is] working through love” (Galatians 5:6). And this is where the First Great Commandment (i.e., “love God”) meets this Second Great Commandment (i.e., “love others”). If we don’t humbly and gratefully love our liberating God, then we won’t understand or observe the liberty of serving others.

 *What needs to change in your life in order for true freedom in Christ to be understood and observed? Is there anyone with whom your relationship has been fractured due to your self-centered and fleshly focus that you need to reconcile with? Discuss*

Transition: Every Christian must appropriately understand and observe Christian freedom. We have considered the explanation of Christian freedom and discovered that it is counter-cultural and self-denying. It is

not perhaps what we were thinking, and it is not easy. We need significant help in order to enjoy that freedom. And that help is what Paul talks about next—the energy for Christian freedom.

THE ENERGY FOR CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (vv. 16-18)⁷

In verse 16-18, Paul educates us concerning the energy or power source that enables such a self-denying, others-focused experience of Christian liberty. He does so in three parts.

1. *The principle (v. 16) — If I follow the Spirit, I won't follow the flesh.*

Paul writes, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” To “walk by” carries the idea of conducting oneself or orienting oneself according to something. So, the principle for power in Christian freedom is that when we conduct or orient ourselves according to the Spirit, we won't gratify (lit. “complete”—cf. James 1:14-15) the desires of our flesh. The principle is based on simple logic—if we are doing A, we cannot be doing B; so, in order to avoid doing B, do A. To further stress the certainty of this principle, Paul uses a double negative here—“if we walk by the Spirit, we will *in no way* gratify the desires of the flesh.” This is a wonderfully energizing principle!

Yet, we need to become more practical. Specifically, how do we “walk by” or “conduct/orient ourselves according to” the Spirit? Well, let's do a simple Bible study.

In Ephesians 5:18-6:9, Paul essentially gives us the same principle, yet worded a bit differently—he exhorts us to “be filled with the Spirit.” Following that command are three results or evidences that we have been filled with the Spirit: singing (5:19), thanksgiving (5:20), and submitting (5:21-6:9—wives, 5:22; husbands, 5:25; children, 6:1; fathers, 6:4; servants, 6:5; masters, 6:9). In its parallel passage in Colossians 3:16-4:1, those same evidences of “being filled with the Spirit” or of “walking by the Spirit” are provided—singing (3:16), thanksgiving (3:17), and submitting (3:18-4:1—wives, 3:18; husbands, 3:19; children, 3:20; fathers, 3:21; servants, 3:22; masters, 4:1). But whereas Galatians commands us to “walk by the Spirit” and Ephesians exhorts us to “be filled with the Spirit,” Colossians instructs, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (3:16).

When we put these passages together, we realize that “walking by the Spirit,” being “filled with the Spirit,” and allowing “the word of Christ [to] dwell in [us] richly” are synonymous. Whereas “being filled with the Spirit” is passive, our active responsibility to ensure such a filling is to “let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly.” In other words, being “Spirit-filled” and “Word-filled” are one in the same.

This understanding shouldn't surprise us. According to 2 Peter 1:2, the Holy Spirit authored Scripture and leads us by it. 2 Corinthians 3:18 tells us that as we behold “the glory of the Lord” in Scripture, the Spirit transforms us into that image. And Ephesians 6:17 teaches us that the “sword of the Spirit” is the “Word of God.”

At this point, we must take the application even further and clarify what we mean by “letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly.” Ultimately, this means more than mere studying, meditating, and memorizing. Christ Himself told us what this meant. In Matthew 7:24-25, Jesus said, “Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and *does them* will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock” (contrast with “does not do them” in vv. 26-27). See, we have not “let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly” unless we are responding to it regularly in obedience. There will be no fruit if there is no obedience. The Spirit uses your obedient response to His Word to produce His fruit within you.

So, on a daily and practical level, to “walk by the Spirit” looks like this—surrendering to the Spirit's leadership on a daily (and moment-by-moment) basis (remember, we are orienting ourselves according to Him), adding to that a knowledge of what His will is (i.e., Bible study), and climaxing that in obedience as He gives us opportunities throughout the day. When we do that, the Holy Spirit fertilizes our hearts with His Word so that He can bring forth His fruit (vv. 22-23)—and we “will not gratify the desires of the flesh”!

2. *The problem (v. 17) — The Spirit and the flesh vie for control of my life.*

Paul states in verse 17, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” The “flesh” refers to that old sinful nature that still

lives within. As Ryken has said, “The flesh is the part of me that does not want what God wants, my corrupt human nature in all its weakness and depravity.” While the flesh has positionally been dethroned, it still fights to usurp its will on us. And when it isn’t being combatted by Spirit-directed living, it keeps us from living as we should in our Christian freedom.

Illustration: Cartoonist Walt Kelly had an old comic strip named “Pogo” (the Possum). He was famous for saying, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Illustration: C.H. Spurgeon told of a preacher boy who was very arrogant in his deportment yet gifted behind the pulpit. One Sunday this young man was preaching on the Armor of God. He spoke of the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, feet shod with gospel of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, and sword of the Spirit. Toward the conclusion of his sermon he boldly announce, “I am wearing the whole armor of God, where is the enemy, bring him on!” Spurgeon whispered, “He is inside the armor.”

Indeed, our natural predisposition is “opposed to” the supernatural orientation of the Spirit. On an encouraging note, this struggle doesn’t exist in the life of an unbeliever, for he is totally controlled by sin (cf. Romans 3:9-20; 5:21a; 8:5-8; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1-3; Hebrews 2:14-15). This spiritual struggle, then, is evidence of spiritual life within the heart of a Christian. That should encourage, but not pacify—instead, that struggle should remind us to “walk by the Spirit” in order that our new life might practically express itself in every dimension of our Christian experience. Then, and only then, will we be “free indeed”!

3. **The promise (v. 18) — Spirit-led living avoids the bondage of the Law.**

If we live according to the flesh, we put ourselves back into the realm of slavery and condemnation (cf. 3:3; 4:23, 29). “But,” Paul writes in verse 18, “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” Paralleling to “walk by the Spirit,” to be “led by” the Spirit means to be guided and directed, and as we have seen, such guidance comes through our Spirit-illuminated exposure to and obedience to God’s Word (Psalm 119:105). The leadership of the Spirit, which directs us into loving Christianity (cf. Romans 5:5), rescues us from the burden and bondage of the Law.



Application: How can we daily surrender to the Spirit’s leadership, guidance, and perspective? How can we add to that submission an active obedience? How should we respond when we are aware of verse 17’s spiritual conflict within us?

Transition: Every Christian must appropriately understand and observe Christian freedom. To assist us with that goal, we’ve traced Paul’s explanation of Christian freedom and learned of the energy for Christian freedom. Now, let’s turn our attention to the expressions of Christian freedom.

THE EXPRESSIONS OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (vv. 19-23)

Verses 19-23 take us for an in-depth tour of the conflict mentioned in verse 17. The flesh expresses itself one way in our Christian lives, while the Spirit has an altogether different expression. These are pictured in verse 19-23.

1. **The “works of the flesh” (vv. 19-21)**

The flesh produces many “works.” In contrast to the word that will be used of the Spirit’s activity, this emphasizes what we naturally produce.

a. **Character (vv. 19-21a)**

Our flesh evidences itself in many destructive ways. Verses 19-21a lists, “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.”

- *sexual immorality* – sexual unfaithfulness to spouse, marital infidelity
- *impurity* – broader word for any sexual sin, verbal, visual, mental, or physical
- *sensuality* – acting without restraint or with animalistic desires; “a party animal”
- *idolatry* – the worship of anything or anyone other than God
- *sorcery* – practice of evoking spirits

- *enmity* – the expression of dislike or detest for another
- *jealousy, rivalries, envy* – a constant desire to excel over others; discontentment and despising; the over-competitiveness caused by such a spirit
- *fits of anger* – raging resentment; losing one’s temper
- *strife, dissensions, divisions* – causing discord or dissension among others; a quarrelsome person; factious commotion and sectarianism
- *drunkenness* – intoxication and inebriation; being “under the influence”
- *orgies* – carousing; unruly, boisterous behavior
- *things like these* – There are many other ways for the flesh to manifest itself in our lives.

b. Consequence (v. 21b)

Paul writes, “Those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” To “do such things” doesn’t refer to temporary disobedience and occasional failures. Instead, this present active participle should be translated, “Those who are practicing”—it refers to the character and nature of one’s life.

So, let’s apply the simple logic of this warning—if these “works” characterize your Christian experience (consider specifically: impurity, idolatry, strife/rivalry, jealousy/envy, fits of anger, divisions, drunkenness), then at the very least you are operating in the flesh, and perhaps you have never been rescued from the flesh. The very “kingdom of God” is at stake here!

2. The “fruit of the Spirit” (vv. 22-23)

The works of the flesh are naturally practiced by us, but the fruit of the Spirit is supernaturally produced in us. It is the fruit “of” the Spirit, meaning these nine-fold characteristics flow from Him. He alone is the source; we are but the soil. They are His work produced in and through us. Furthermore, the word “fruit” is intentionally singular in contrast to the plural “works” of the flesh. This points to the unity of its purpose. The Spirit has but one goal—Christlikeness.

a. Character (vv. 22-23a)

Paul writes in verses 22-23a, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

- *Love* – the sum and substance of what it means to be a Christian; the soil from which all other virtues grow; the determined act of the will that sacrificially gives of self for the sake of others
- *Joy* – the spiritual response of pleasure from knowing that God loves us and therefore finding our greatest delight in our relationship with and position in Christ
- *Peace* – the tranquility of soul that results from being positionally and practically right with God and others
- *Patience* – tolerance and the ability to endure injuries inflicted by others without getting angry and retaliating
- *Kindness* – love in action; not just seeing and sensing a need, but actively working to meet the need
- *Goodness* – moral and spiritual excellence of life that afflicts the comfortably apathetic and comforts the afflicted around us
- *Faithfulness* – integrity, honesty, loyalty, or trustworthiness; dependability
- *Gentleness* – the attitude of heart that accepts the Lord's dealings with us as good, perfect, and acceptable and not open for dispute or resistance; the opposite of a self-seeking attitude
- *Self-Control* – the governing of one’s desires

b. Consequence (v. 23b)

Paul encourages us by saying that “against such things there is no law.” Sometimes in a strict home or in a rigid school, a student will woefully ask, “What *can* I do?” The Christian is encouraged that there is no law and no penalty against these virtues—that is freedom indeed!

Application: Work backwards—is your life characterized by “the works of the flesh” or by “the fruit of the Spirit”? This contrast is meant to stir us to self-analysis. And since the works of the flesh condemn while the fruit of the Spirit frees, we cannot afford to be lethargic in our evaluation or in our response to what we discover.

Transition: Every Christian must appropriately understand and observe Christian freedom. The final aspect of Christian freedom that we must consider is the entrance into Christian freedom.

THE ENTRANCE INTO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (vv. 24-26)

Verses 24-26 serve to remind us how our Christian experience started and to encourage us that we can know victory in our struggle to live out our Christian freedom.

1. *Salvation started by crucifying the flesh (v. 24).*

Verse 24 reminds us that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” When we placed our trust in Jesus’ gracious sacrifice for us, we were essentially crucified with Him (cf. Galatians 2:20). The penalty of sin was destroyed and the dominion of sin was broken. We sacrificed self- lordship for the lordship of Christ, and we repented from our fleshly desires and indulgences.

Similarly, Ephesians 4:20-24 tells us that at conversion, Christ taught us to put off our old self, to be renewed (passive) in the spirit of our minds, and to put on the new self. Having already been taught that through our co-crucifixion with Christ, we need to continue to practice that, which is what Paul stresses next in verses 25-26.

2. *Salvation continues by conforming to the Spirit (vv. 25-26).*

Paul reasons, “If [or, since] we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.” The phrase “keep in step with” translates a Greek word that means, “to be in line with a person or thing considered as standard for one’s conduct: hold to, agree with, follow, conform.”⁸ Having surrendered to God’s Spirit at our conversion, we should continue to surrender to Him. We should be careful to conform our daily experience to the Spirit’s standard (v.

16). What started at conversion should continue in our daily experience. Every moment we should follow the marching orders of the Spirit, refusing to come down from the cross to serve any other master.

Once again, the passage ends with its emphasis on others in our practice of Christian freedom. Success or failure in Christian freedom and Spirit-led living has ramifications beyond just ourselves. Our self-centered rejection of the Spirit’s guidance can cause us to “become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”

CONCLUSION

Every Christian must appropriately understand and observe Christian freedom.

1. Christian freedom primarily has to do with others, not me. I should be using Christian freedom to lovingly serve others, not to selfishly indulge my flesh. That is the right restriction in order for a richer and more rewarding freedom to be enjoyed.
2. This expression of Christian freedom—summarized by “the fruit of the Spirit”—is not natural, but supernatural. Therefore, I must constantly surrender to and obey the Spirit’s leading as He uses His Word to instruct my choices. Only then will my heart be energized and fertilized to bring forth this fruit of freedom. The default alternative is the relationship-fractioning “works of the flesh.”
3. At my conversion, God’s Spirit planted the seed of this fruitful freedom by associating me with Christ’s victorious death. The daily process of sanctification in which I produce a harvest of others-loving, others-serving fruit happens as I remember and respond to that initial crucifixion.
4. This spiritual fruit of loving service is a compelling testimony to the saving power of Christ, for “by this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). And so, Christian freedom can itself bring about freedom for those who are, as of yet, still in bondage to sin and death.

ENDNOTES

¹ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Conversations on Faith and Life*, Discussion Guide (Grand Rapids:

² “Verse 13, like v. 1, is transitional and marks a new beginning. The fact that ‘you’ is emphasized in the Greek by being placed first in the sentence (cf. NIV) shows that Paul is building on the confidence expressed earlier as to what side the Galatians are on (v. 10); the language of the verse shows that Paul is echoing the original challenge of v. 1: ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.’ On the other hand, while in the first instance Paul followed his statement with a warning about falling again into slavery, in this case the warning is changed into the demand not to allow this freedom to become an excuse for sinful self-indulgence” (James Montgomery Boice, “Galatians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 10 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976], 492).

³ It has been widely noted that “somewhere between *license* on the one hand and *legalism* on the other hand is true Christian liberty” (Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996], 717). Legalism and libertinism (license) are often pictured as two great ravines on either side of the Christian path. “Where legalism demands responsibility without freedom, license grants freedom without responsibility” (Philip Ryken). So far in this letter, Paul’s emphasis has been to combat legalism; here he challenges the pendulum-swinging reaction of license.

⁴ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 158.

⁵ “Even the world knows that personal freedom cannot be unlimited. The most libertarian societies of history have been forced to recognize that they could not survive if each individual had the right to run roughshod over others while gratifying his own whims and fulfilling his own ambitions. Anarchy is obviously destructive, and one person’s rights are necessarily restricted by the fights of others” (John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], 149).

⁶ Adapted from Wiersbe, 717.

⁷ Throughout this point, we will be drawing from Ben Farrell’s material, available here—colonialindy.org/the-fruit-of-the-spirit.

⁸ Arndt, 946.