

Galatians 5:13-18

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] Morning, church. Good to see you this morning. We're going to continue our series in Galatians this morning, looking at Galatians chapter 5, verses 13 through 18. I'm going to turn there in the pew Bible with me. Galatians 5, 13 through 18. That's the text we'll be focusing on this morning. Let me pray for us before we turn to God's Word together.

Holy God, we gather before you this morning. We pray that you would still our hearts. Lord, that your peace would be pervasive among us now as we come before your Word. Lord, that your Spirit would be present in his fullness, filling us, Lord, with the illumination and the wisdom and the insight and the openness of heart to receive your Word and to see Christ and all of his majesty. Lord, we long to be changed and we bring ourselves before you this morning before your Word and ask that you would come and you would speak to us, you would comfort us, you would challenge us, you would transform us. And God, we pray all these things because that is the promise you've made to us, that your Word can do this very thing. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

So Galatians chapter 5, 13 through 18. Let me read these verses for us. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Well, how do you use the freedom you've been given? That's what our passage is about this morning.

[2 : 3 6] How do you use this great freedom you've been given? Paul begins by saying you've been called to freedom, brothers and sisters. If you've put your trust in Christ, you've got this tremendous and awesome gift. First and foremost, this freedom is freedom from the condemnation of the law. Freedom from having to earn your acceptance with God. We read and we discussed for many weeks now, but poignantly in chapter 3, Paul says, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. The prison doors, as it were, have swung open and the full pardon has come down to us and we are free to step into the light of God's presence, all because Christ has died in our place.

There's a review of the last three months if you haven't been with us. But this also means freedom not just from the law, but also freedom toward certain things. Freedom from the law, but freedom toward what we might call things indifferent. Remember Paul said earlier in this chapter, in Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. Circumcision, Paul's saying, is an indifferent thing. And we have freedom toward those things. Now what are some examples of things indifferent today?

Well, they're the classic examples, right? In the 1950s, everyone was talking about drinking alcohol and going to the movies, playing cards, and dancing. Could Christians do these things? I went to a Christian college that in the 50s forbade dancing on campus. Not allowed.

But you know, the Bible doesn't explicitly forbid or command any of these things. So indeed, we're free with respect to them. Now those are kind of easy ones to spot, aren't they?

And I'd imagine most of us would agree that they're things indifferent, but what are some other examples? What about areas related to corporate worship? What kind of freedom do we have there? Think about church calendars.

[4 : 40] Must we fast during Lent? Must we observe Lent at all? Or Easter? Or Christmas? Or Advent?

Or what about clerical dress? Must I wear a robe when I preach? Well, if that's the case, I'm already sinning, aren't I? Or what about a tie? Or what about dress pants? Must you not wear jeans when you come to church?

Some of you would have to be asked to leave the building, right? Look at us exerting our freedom this morning. It's a wonderful thing, isn't it? What about musical styles? Must we only sing songs written before 1850?

Or for that matter, after 2010? The answer to all these is no. You don't have to show up to church in a three-piece suit. And you don't have to show up to church in a trendy V-neck T-shirt that you just found at American Apparel.

In all these things, we have freedom. We don't have to only sing songs by Watts and Wesley, or only by Crowder and Tomlin. We're free. But this freedom toward things indifferent doesn't just relate to the church gathered on Sundays.

[5 : 56] It relates to all of our Christian living. The size of your house. The number of hours you put in at work.

Whether you send your kids to public school, private school, or home school. The Bible doesn't give specific instructions on any of these matters. They are things indifferent, and there are a million more.

And in all these things, we are free. Now, as I mentioned at the start, here's the real question. You have this freedom, Christian.

You have this freedom, church. Now, what are you going to do with it? I remember turning 16 and getting my driver's license.

And feeling in those first moments when I stepped out of the DMV, the sweet freedom of finally being able to drive. I didn't have to wait for my parents to pick me up and drop me off.

[6 : 59] I didn't have to tag along with my older friends. I was free. I could put the keys into the ignition, put the car into gear, and I could go. Of course, the question was, what would I do with that freedom?

Would I drive the car into a ditch? Or would I stay on the road? And where, assuming I stayed on the road, would I take myself? Of course, the freedom of driving wears off quickly when your mom says, Nick, now that you can drive, go pick up some groceries at the store.

We need another gallon of milk. Run some errands for us. It wears off quickly, doesn't it? Sorry, high schoolers, if you're looking forward to that. But you know, it's similar for Christians, is it not?

We're free from the law's condemnation. We're free toward things indifferent. It's a sweet and powerful feeling. It's almost intoxicating in its weight. But what are we going to do with our freedom?

Or we might ask it this way, what have we been set free for? Now, as we get ready to leave the driveway, as it were, we have to see that there's a danger.

[8 : 15] And it's a danger that every Christian encounters and every Christian church encounters. And it's this. Though we have this great freedom in Christ, we are prone to use it, as Paul says, as an opportunity for the flesh.

Now, when Paul says flesh here, he doesn't mean your physical, material body. He means your sinful nature that still indwells you. He's saying that we can let our freedom in Christ become a pretext for laziness and pride, indulgence and greed, bitterness and envy, and on and on.

In fact, the word opportunity here is actually a military term. It means something like a beachhead or a launching pad or a strategic foothold.

Don't be naive, Paul says. There's a war going on. And it's your freedom in Christ that can be the very place where sin gets a foothold in your life to take you down and to take others down with you.

Now, what can that look like? Some examples easily come to mind. It can look like exercising your freedom to go to the movies, but choosing one that you know is filled with questionable content.

[9 : 36] It can look like exercising your freedom to drink alcohol, but getting drunk. Now, of course, those kinds of abuses of our freedom are easy to spot, and most of us are on guard against them, right?

They're sort of the easy targets, but there are subtler forms, aren't there? We might not be engaged in blatant wrongdoing, but we can harbor a whole host of respectable sins, can't we?

We think about career decisions, for example, without any thought of how God's kingdom might best be advanced by the career we choose.

We plan out our family budget without any thought of how aggressively and sacrificially we might give to world missions.

Now, don't get me wrong. The Bible doesn't tell you exactly what career to choose or exactly how to plan your budget. You have freedom, friends, in all these areas. And yet, Paul is warning us not to let our freedom become a pretext for indulging our selfish, sinful nature.

[10 : 49] After all, God doesn't give us freedom in our choice of jobs just so we can chase one promotion after another and win status in the world's eyes. God doesn't give us freedom in our financial planning so we can indulge ourselves with entertainments and comforts.

That's not what we've been set free for. And I'm saying this as much to myself as I'm saying it to you. Because it's a reality in my own heart.

That the freedom Christ has given me can become a strategic foothold for our fallen nature. Well, instead, Paul brings us to the very heart of what it means to be set free.

In verse 13, he says, True freedom, he says, is loving service.

That's what it means to be truly free. Not to live for yourself, but to live for others. Now, that's something of a paradox, isn't it? In fact, Paul's being intentionally provocative to make his point loud and clear.

[11 : 58] The word he uses for serve here literally means to become a slave. You know you're really free, Paul's saying, when you're willing to become a slave in order to love one another.

When you willingly constrain yourself or limit yourself or inconvenience yourself or submit yourself for the good of others. True freedom means to be free.

Are we thinking, what church family will I be able to be a part of if I move to this city or that city? Or if my job takes me to this city? Or if I'm offered a promotion in that city? Are we thinking, are God's people there?

Where can I worship? Where can I join God's work? That's real freedom in action, friends. Because it's using your freedom to serve and love. Not thinking just about yourself, but about God's people and God's world and how you can become a servant.

True freedom means thinking about your family budget and asking questions like, how much can we give to the advance of the gospel and world missions? What sacrifices will we make this year in order to do so?

[13 : 35] What needs in our own church, our own community, could we possibly contribute? What will it take for us to give more this year than last? Again, that's how you know you're really free.

Because you're using your freedom to serve and love. Now, of course, that's not at all what we think freedom ought to look like, is it? We think freedom means doing whatever I choose as long as it doesn't hurt anybody, right?

Real freedom doesn't look like sacrifice or constraint or inconvenience, we think. But that's where our collective thinking about freedom today is simply off the mark.

True freedom, we're told here, is to become a servant. We must use our freedom in Christ to serve one another through love. Now, that's easier said than done, isn't it?

Maybe you're thinking, oh man, weighty sermon this morning. Serve, serve, serve. But Paul doesn't leave us without some encouragement, without some glimpses of hope, without even a look straight at the very thing that can empower us to do this and to do it with joy.

[14 : 54] We think, why should we use our freedom to serve? And where do we find the power to actually do it? And thankfully, that's exactly what Paul tells us in the rest of our passage.

In the rest of our passage this morning, he gives us two reasons why, and then he tells us where to get the power to do it. So let's look first at these two reasons why we must use our freedom in Christ to serve one another.

Look at verse 14. We must use our freedom in Christ to serve one another because love, Paul says, fulfills the law. Through love, serve one another, for the whole law is fulfilled in one word.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Now, if you've been following the Galatians series, you might be thinking, wait a second, I thought we weren't under the law anymore.

Isn't that the whole point of Galatians? Is Paul sort of sneaking this in the back door all of a sudden? Well, you're right. If you've repented of your sin and placed your trust in Christ, you aren't under the law anymore.

[15 : 59] You're not under the law anymore. The law does not, and it cannot condemn you. But the moral law still expresses the life that God created us to live, friends.

It expresses how the machine of our humanity is meant to run. So if you're just living for yourself, you're actually living out of whack with your God-given nature.

You're falling short of the glory and joy that God created you to experience. You're driving your car right through the quicksand, instead of down the smooth, paved road of God's intention for your life.

You see, exercising your freedom and loving service is like turning the key to the bolted door of your heart.

Consider with me, when you pause from your busyness and your stress, Do you find that there's a residual joylessness or emptiness or boredom or frustration?

[17 : 09] When you finally get a chance to pause, is it numbness or dullness that you feel? Could it stem from the fact that we're living to serve ourselves instead of living to serve others?

Could it stem from the fact that we're living out of joint with how we were created to live as loving servants? On this score, one book I've been reading on Galatians as we've been working through this series compares the life of two men.

William Wilberforce and Ian Fleming. Ian Fleming was the author of the James Bond novels. If any of you are James Bond aficionados, anyone? One. I saw one hand. Okay.

Ian Fleming was the author of the James Bond novels. And on the surface, this guy lived a life that looked like complete freedom. He was fabulously wealthy. Incredibly popular. He had a home in the Caribbean, for goodness sakes.

It's a life many today would kill to have. And yet his life was wracked by addictions and affairs and tragedy.

[18 : 29] He had everything, and yet sadly, he had nothing. Compare that to William Wilberforce, the great British politician who led the abolition of the slave trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

In this struggle, William Wilberforce expended everything. His time, his energy, his reputation, his money, even his health.

Driven by his love and commitment to Christ, Wilberforce became a servant for the sake of others. A servant for the sake of men and women that he would never meet personally.

Of course, his life was not free from hardship and suffering. Just the opposite. But you know, he knew true freedom. And he knew the joy that comes from using that freedom to serve.

We can think of many more examples, of course, but the point is this. When we serve one another through love, we're living in line with God's intended pattern for our lives. And despite hardships or sacrifices or loss, it means great gain and great satisfaction.

[19 : 41] Not because we're under the law, slaving to obey it, but because we're fulfilling the law. The very thing that the law always pointed to.

The very spirit and intention of God's law coming to fullness and fruition in you and I, friends. As we serve one another in love.

Loving service is the way we start living into and living out of this great salvation we've been given in Christ.

It's how we're made to live. Another way of saying this is that living a life of loving service means being truly and fully human. Whereas not doing so is dehumanizing.

Not doing so is dehumanizing. And that leads us actually to Paul's second point. Look at verse 15. There Paul says we must use our freedom in Christ to serve one another because the opposite of serving one another is consuming one another.

[20 : 42] But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you're not consumed by one another, he says. These words conjure up images of wild beasts fighting so ferociously with one another that they end up annihilating one another.

You see, when we don't serve one another, we consume one another like animals. In other words, a fleshly use of our freedom will annihilate our relationships and turn us into beasts.

Our churches, our friendships, our marriages will all get consumed and destroyed. And in particular, what Paul seems to be explicitly talking about here are our words.

Bite and devour our metaphors for words that cut each other down and tear each other apart. And the grammar of the sentence suggests that such behavior was actually going on in the Galatian churches.

It wasn't just a hypothetical danger that Paul was throwing out there. It was real. There was sarcasm and acrimony. There were quarrels and accusations.

[21 : 41] There was anger and dissensions. And those threats are still very real threats in our relationships today, are they not? I like how Calvin handles this verse.

He writes, By biting and devouring, Paul means to my mind slanders, accusations, wrangling, and other kinds of verbal quarrels. And what is the end of them?

To be consumed. But the property of love is a mutual protection and kindness. Would that we always remembered when the devil tempts us to disputes, that the disagreement of members within the church can lead to nothing but the ruin and consumption of the whole body.

How unhappy, how mad it is, that we who are members of the same body should voluntarily conspire together for mutual destruction.

How unhappy, how mad it is. Brothers and sisters, the greatest danger to the survival of our church, the greatest danger to the survival of your marriage, the greatest danger to the survival of your friendships, are not external dangers.

[23 : 00] They're not circumstances. They're not hardships. They're not persecutions. They're not external, but internal ones. The sarcastic snipe over the phone.

The belittling comment in public. The seemingly playful banter that turns into cutting and bitter remarks. Jesus said the very gates of hell can't prevail against the church.

But if we bite and devour one another, we'll all be consumed. How unhappy, how mad it is, that we who are members of the same body should voluntarily conspire together for mutual destruction.

How mad indeed. Now to my knowledge, there aren't major dissensions ripping through our church. And for that, we should be grateful to God for his grace. Many of us have known churches that have devolved into little more than a viper's den.

Have we not? And thankfully, Trinity is not that. But brothers and sisters, I plead with you. Watch your words.

[24 : 09] Watch out, Paul says. A little sarcasm here, a little criticism there, and soon we're biting and devouring and consuming. It can happen to a church.

It can happen to a marriage. It can happen to a friendship. Do you see it in your life? If you do, then confess it to God.

And confess it to one another. Repent and seek God's free forgiveness. And pray for God's grace to change your heart. And to take those words away.

Calvin says the property of love is a mutual protection and kindness. Ask God to give you that kind of heart towards your brothers and sisters, towards your spouse, towards your friends.

Instead of consuming one another, let us serve one another. Imagine what a beautiful thing it would be. If the question we had on our mind when we came each Sunday to church was, who can I serve?

[25 : 18] What are the needs that I can meet? What if we came not asking, what am I going to criticize today? But who can I love? What if we were marshalling all of our creativity and all of our energy?

And I know there's a lot of creativity and energy in this room. There's a lot of talents and gifts. What if we were marshalling all of this, not to use others or to compare ourselves to others, but to build others up.

Not to get, but to give. What if in this place, words were being spoken that brought life? Words that affirmed God's grace at work in us.

Words that challenged, yes. Words that confronted, yes. But ultimately, words that called us forth to live in light of the mercy and grace of Christ. And what if people found here a place that in addition to words like those, they also found generosity and hospitality and practical acts of service?

In other words, what if we genuinely loved each other and served each other? What if that's what our church family looked like and our friendships look like and our marriages look like?

[26 : 33] That would be a beautiful thing, would it not? I think it would be such a thing of stunning beauty, in fact, that for one, our evangelistic efforts would probably explode.

Who wouldn't at least be curious about a place where people weren't asking for once, what can I get out of it, but how can I give through it?

People would have to ask, what is it that makes that group of people that way? Look at yourselves. Many of us have nothing in common with one another other than Christ.

What makes this place so different from what I experience every day in my work life and in my family and out in the world? People would come and they would ask and we'd be able to say, it's Christ.

He set us free for this very thing. And you can join too. So there are two reasons why.

[27 : 41] We must use our freedom in Christ to serve. Love fulfills the law, Paul says. And on the other hand, the opposite of serving one another is consuming one another.

But even with those great reasons, it's still hard, isn't it? It's much easier to use our freedom as a pretext for the flesh than as a springboard for loving service. I think we can all admit to that. We naturally seem prone to serve ourselves as opposed to serving one another.

But thankfully, in addition to telling us why we should do these things, Paul also tells us how we can. He gave us two powerful reasons why we should serve, but now he tells us about the power itself.

In verses 16 through 18, we're told that we can use our freedom in Christ to serve because we're led by the Spirit. Look at verses 16 through 18. In these verses, Paul describes that great inner conflict that every Christian experiences between their regenerate, renewed self, indwelt by the Spirit, and their old sinful nature that still holds on.

These two are warring against one another, Paul says, and it keeps us from doing what we want to do. But Paul says, if we walk by the Spirit, we can experience victory over the desires of our sinful nature.

[29 : 00] Of course, it will never be a complete victory in this life. We'll continue. This war will continue until we're freed from the presence of sin in heaven. But as we walk by the Spirit and as we're led by the Spirit, we can see real change and real growth and real victory.

Now, we're going to talk more about this passage next week. Greg's going to pick it up and sort of go a little deeper. But for now, I just want us to see that the power to live the lives of loving service that Paul describes here in verses 13 through 15 comes from the Holy Spirit.

Not from the law, not from ratcheting up our willpower just one more notch, but from the Spirit. Friends, every believer in Christ is indwelt by God the Holy Spirit.

And we need to remember that the Holy Spirit is a person that we can relate to, not a force that we harness or manipulate. It's not as if Paul's saying in this verse, Luke, use the force.

Right? We often think of the Spirit that way. No, Paul's telling us to realize that God, in person, is walking with us each step of our lives.

[30 : 14] And in fact, he's not just walking with us, but ahead of us. We're led by the Spirit. And in verse 25, Paul says, keep in step with the Spirit, which means that the Spirit is ahead of us, treading the path for us to keep. Now, the very fact that the Spirit abides with us and in us is itself a great encouragement.

It means, friends, that you're not alone. God is there. God is here. When the harsh word is ready to fly out of your mouth, and you know you shouldn't say it, but the bow is pulled back, and you're ready to let it go, remember that the Holy Spirit is in you, ready to lead you, ready to soften you, ready to change you as you submit to him.

And you can put the bow and arrow down, and you can forbear, and you can speak a word of kindness. Sadly, we often have fairly weak images in our minds of who the Spirit is, and I think that accounts for a lot of our sort of weakness in Christian living.

We imagine him like a shadow or a mist. We think he's like Casper, the friendly ghost. When in reality, the Holy Spirit is God, and he's holy.

J.I. Packer quotes an account in one of his books on the Holy Spirit written by missionaries in Manchuria from 1908, and they describe in this account how hardened Chinese men were brought to the conviction and confession of their sins, and how they wept when asking one another for prayer.

[31 : 59] I want us to listen to how they describe what the Holy Spirit did in their midst, and let this challenge and correct our weak views of the Spirit. Listen to what they write. They say, a power has come into the church that we cannot control if we would.

It is a miracle for a stolid, self-righteous Chinese man to go out of his way to confess sins that no torture of the Yemen could force from him. For such a man to demean himself to crave weeping the prayers of his fellow believers is beyond all human explanation.

Perhaps you will say it's a sort of religious hysteria. So did some of us. But here we are, about 60 Scottish and Irish Presbyterians who have seen it.

All shades of temperament. And much as many of us shrank from it at first, everyone who has seen and heard what we have is certain that there's only one explanation, that God, the Holy Spirit, is manifesting himself.

One clause of the creed that lives before us now in all its inevitable, awful solemnity is, I believe in the Holy Ghost.

[33 : 22] A power we cannot control, they said. Inevitable, awful, solemnity. God, the Holy Spirit, manifesting himself.

God, the Holy Spirit, who makes grown men weep for their sins. God, the Holy Spirit, who strikes humble belief into skeptical hearts. God, the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the face of the deep at the beginning of creation.

confession. This is the one who indwells you, Christian. One who, if he chose, could make every one of us drop to our knees and weep in confession of sin and in praise of God's mercy and grace.

What does it mean to walk and be led by such a one as this? First, just to acknowledge who he is. To acknowledge that he, in all his glory, is present and that you are not alone.

But second, it is to realize what he does. Not just who he is, but what he does. You see, the Holy Spirit's main work, friends, is to make real to our hearts the person and work and glory of Christ.

[34 : 57] Jesus himself said to the Holy Spirit, he will testify of me. The Holy Spirit floods our hearts with a deeper knowledge of Jesus.

Do you want to know where the power for loving service comes from? It comes when the Holy Spirit makes the servant work of Christ unbearably real to our souls. You see, in the preaching of the gospel, the Holy Spirit comes and makes Christ glorious to our deepest affections.

So when we think of our calling to serve, the Holy Spirit shows us Christ who came not to serve, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

the Holy Spirit comes and shows us Christ who is equal with God from all eternity, equal in freedom and power and majesty and righteousness, and yet who counted that equality not as a thing to be exploited for his own gain.

God the Son came and emptied himself and became a servant. and he became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, so that he might serve us and wash us clean.

[36 : 21] the Holy Spirit comes and shows us how the one who is utterly free from before the beginning of time allowed himself to be pinned to a cross, to be mocked and abused, to be bit and devoured and consumed so that you and I can be forgiven and free.

Not free to sin, but free to serve just like him. Christian, the one who calls you to love and to serve in freedom is the one who has freely served you, meeting your deepest need.

True freedom is loving service. That is what Christ did for us on the cross. Do you want the power to serve? Walk with the Spirit and in walking with the Spirit dwell on Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us and who fills us with his Spirit so that we might do the same.

Let's pray together. Lord, we pray that there are many, and we acknowledge there are many reasons why we're so reticent reticent to give our lives in service to one another.

God, there's fear, there's anxiety, there's worry. Lord, what will happen if I put myself out there like that? Will I get hurt emotionally?

[38 : 00] Will I get drained financially? Lord, will I get embarrassed because I won't have the right answers? God, there's so many things that keep us from living in light of our freedom to serve.

Holy Spirit, would you come and would you show us Christ who is our security and our safety and our well-being so that we can have the freedom not to fear but to serve.

Lord, we ask all this in Christ's name. Amen.