



BIBLE STUDY SERIES

# *Free Indeed*

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LESSON 8

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## **The Misuse of Liberty**

**Galatians 5:13**

*“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.”*

Criss-crossing the continental United States is the interstate highway system. First envisioned in 1912, the current freeway grid began in 1956 and was completed in 1992. These 48,890 miles of roadway stretch like an asphalt ribbon from the eastern seaboard to the Pacific Ocean and from the northern boundary along Canada to the Deep South, the Gulf States, and Mexico. The U.S. interstate system is a modern marvel that serves as a circulatory system for our nation’s economy, facilitating the movement of goods and services across state lines. However, these roadways represent much more

than commercial transport. They stand as a silent witness to freedom, a staple of American culture, and a reflection of our fascination with open roads and the automobile.

For some immigrants, freedom of travel is one of the first experiences they have with the liberty afforded to them as U.S. citizens. But the freedom we enjoy behind the wheel of an automobile is governed by the rules of the road and basic civility. The freedom of travel, like all freedoms, demands restraint and responsibility.

Similarly, Christian liberty functions within these clear boundaries. Believers who abuse Christian liberty by claiming that grace has removed all restraints have an irreverent view of their freedom because they use their liberty with little regard for the holiness of God. They act as though they are not accountable to others and have an irresponsible view of their freedom because they use their liberty without considering other believers. Restraint and responsibility are two equal parts of true freedom.

In Galatians 5:13, the Apostle Paul reminds the believers, *“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.”* In this verse, Paul acknowledges both aspects of true Christian liberty. First, he cautions restraint: *“Use not liberty for an occasion for the flesh.”* Second, he emphasizes responsibility: *“...By love serve one another.”* Thus, he specifies the proper and responsible attitude toward our freedom in Christ. While some Christians may abuse their freedom in Christ by confusing liberty with license under the pretense of grace, far more believers misuse their liberty by acting upon their freedom with little or no concern for others. In all his

writings, Paul never uses liberty to justify personal sin. Christian liberty is real freedom in Christ, but it must always operate within God’s boundaries of love, conscience, and His glory. The New Testament offers three guiding principles that protect believers from misusing their liberty.

## **Our Liberty Is Limited by a New Law.**

The child of God is no longer under the Law but under grace. However, being under grace does not mean the child of God is without law. In the New Testament, we discover four immutable laws that fortify our liberty in Christ. These four laws not only protect our liberty but also prohibit us from living a selfish life that does not honor the Lord.

The first is the Law of Faith (Romans 3:27). In Romans chapter 3, Paul explains that we have no room for boasting on the part of the redeemed because we are saved by faith in the finished work of Christ (verses 24-27). Liberty is purchased by Christ and is available to all through faith in Him.

The second immutable law is the Law of the Spirit (Romans 8:2). The Holy Spirit of God enable us to live in newness of life. The same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead now abides in us (Romans 8:11). In the power of the Spirit, we can live in victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The third law that protects our liberty is the Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). By this, Paul refers to the example of Christ Himself and the one unifying requirement that

distinguished His disciples from all others: love. This divine love is produced in the yielded heart of God’s children by the Holy Spirit. It is this very love that compels the Christian to exercise restraint over their will and also wishes for the good of others.

The fourth law is the Law of Liberty (James 1:25; 2:12). The Law of Liberty refers to the written Word of God. Scripture guides our steps, nourishes our growth, and equips us for spiritual battle.

God has designed our freedom to be enjoyed within the protective walls of four immutable laws: the Law of Faith, the Law of the Spirit, the Law of Christ, and the Law of Liberty. Although New Testament believers are under grace, they are not without law. Christians who exercise their freedom within these laws do not misuse their liberty. While God’s Word establishes the boundaries of our liberty, Scripture also teaches that our freedom must be exercised with consideration for others.

## **Our Liberty Considers the Consciences of Others.**

In I Corinthians 10:29, the Apostle Paul asks, “*Why is my liberty judged of another man’s conscience?*” This question is set against the backdrop of Christians consuming meat that had been offered to idols. At that time, markets were flooded with meat from multiple sources. Some came from the butcher, who secured his product from local shepherds and farms. Others came to the market with the excess meat offered to idols in pagan temples. For first-century Christians, this created a difficult situation.

We know that the idol is nothing (I Corinthians 8:4), but for those who were saved out of that culture, eating meat offered to false gods troubled their conscience. Two thousand years removed from the context of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, it is difficult for us to fully comprehend the issue. However, ask yourself this: “Would I be comfortable eating Halal meat that was prayed over by a Muslim Imam and offered to Allah?” With that question, modern-day Christians suddenly find themselves wrestling with the same dilemma.

Paul’s answer is comprehensive. In I Corinthians 10:25-27, he recommends that if your conscience troubles you about eating meat offered to an idol, do not ask questions. Instead, give thanks to God and eat. In verse 28, he advises that if someone tells you that the meat was offered to an idol, refrain from eating it as a testimony to the one who declared it and for your own conscience's sake. In I Corinthians 8:13, Paul writes that if eating meat sacrificed to idols offended a fellow believer, he would rather become a vegetarian than cause another Christian to stumble.

The responsible use of our liberty considers others' consciences. Although the Word of God may not explicitly forbid a certain thing, if it causes someone to stumble, it should be avoided. Paul exhorted the Corinthian Church, “*Give none offence, neither to the Jew, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:32). We misuse our liberty whenever we exercise freedoms that knowingly offend the consciences of others. “The Jews” refers to non-believing Jews, and “the Gentiles” refers to non-believing Gentiles. The “church of God” refers to believing Jews and believing

Gentiles. These three designations encompass every person on the face of the earth. Mature Christians willingly restrict their liberty to love and serve others (Galatians 5:13).

Regarding the unsaved, Paul personally restrained his liberty for the welfare of others in hopes that they might be saved (I Corinthians 10:33). How many unbelievers have rejected the gospel because Christians misused their liberty?

This was Paul’s motive in confronting Peter in Galatians 2:11-14. Peter’s behavior obscured the gospel message, creating confusion for the Gentiles. Whenever Jews were not present, Peter would eat with the Gentiles. However, when James sent representatives from Jerusalem, Peter separated himself from them, fearing what the Jews might think. Peter’s actions gave credibility to the false claims of the Judaizers who were trying to impose the Law of Moses upon the Gentiles.

Even today, it is possible for Christians to misuse their liberty and limit their gospel witness. Believers who embrace worldliness in hopes of reaching the lost fail to realize that the unsaved world is not looking for a cheap imitation of what they currently have. They are longing for something different. Christians who exercise their liberty responsibly exhibit the new life available in Christ. They lovingly limit their liberties so that others might be saved.

How many new believers have been discouraged from continuing in their walk with God and taking the Lord’s call to holiness and sanctification seriously because other Christians misused their liberty? Mature Christians restrict their personal

freedom because they are not seeking their own profit or fulfillment. They are intentional in their efforts not to “*put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way*” (Romans 14:13). Christians who are content to live according to the lowest common denominator influence younger believers to do the same. However, Christians who exercise their freedom in Christ for the good and edification of others safeguard themselves from misusing their liberty (Romans 15:1-2).

## **Our Liberty Is Governed by the Glory of God.**

Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:31, “*Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*” This well-known verse is set in the context of a believer’s use of Christian liberty and establishes the standard by which every action is measured. In those areas where there is no explicit command, children of God must ask themselves, “Does this glorify God?”

As Christians, our lives are guided by our preferences, standards, and convictions. Although these three often work in unison, they are not synonymous and should not be confused. Preferences are shaped by culture and often change. Fashion and hairstyles can only reflect the current culture. Therefore, our preferences are directed by what is available or in vogue. We all have photos of our younger selves that make us laugh because preferences change.

Standards are influenced by both Scripture and culture and guide our behavior. Everyone has standards. Some may be higher than others, and some may be lower, but

everyone has standards. Because standards are influenced by culture, standards can be flexible. Guidelines and community expectations of behavior can vary by environment. Healthy standards that guide our behavior at home, at school, at church, and in public help God’s people avoid offending others. For this reason, Bible-based standards are safe and desirable.

Convictions arise directly from Scripture and remain constant. Convictions are strengthened by a deeper knowledge of God’s Word. Convictions are most easily identified by what one is willing to contend for and die for.

Friction and disunity within the body of Christ result whenever these three are confused. Problems arise when one believer treats a preference as a conviction and expects others to do the same. It is this very issue that Paul addresses in Romans 14:1-15:6. The eating of meat and the observing of holy days were matters of preference and standards, not convictions worth contending over. Christian liberty, rightly understood and exercised, glorifies God and unifies believers. Paul writes, “*Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Romans 15:5-6).

In matters of preferences, standards, and convictions as they relate to our Christian liberty, the unifying consideration is the glory of God. Every Christian must filter these through the same question. Is God glorified by my preferences? Do my

standards bring glory to the Lord? Is God glorified in how I communicate and act upon my convictions? Paul’s admonition is clear: *“Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”*

The American interstate system illustrates a powerful truth about freedom. When we drive on those highways, we enjoy remarkable liberty. We can travel hundreds of miles across state lines, choosing our destination and setting our course. But that freedom exists because of clearly established boundaries. Lanes guide us. Signs warn us. Speed limits restrain us. Rules govern us. If every driver ignored those boundaries in the name of “freedom,” the highways would immediately become extremely dangerous and chaotic.

The same principle applies to our Christian liberty. God has placed loving guardrails around our liberty. The Law of Faith reminds us that we have come through Christ. The Law of the Spirit empowers us to live above the flesh. The Law of Christ teaches us to love others sacrificially. The Law of Liberty, the Word of God, directs our steps. These laws do not cancel our freedom; they protect it.

Mature believers understand that their liberty affects others. A careless exercise of freedom can discourage a weaker believer or hinder an unbeliever from coming to Christ. For that reason, every decision must pass through the one great filter: Does this glorify God? Whether we eat, drink, speak, choose, or act, our liberty must always magnify the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can avoid misusing our liberty by applying these simple truths: Our liberty is limited by a new law, our liberty considers the consciences of others, and our liberty is governed by the glory of God. Misused liberty serves the flesh, true liberty serves Christ and others.