

Digging Deeper

September 20, 2026



The Proper Use of Freedom

Ligonier.org

The gravity of the Galatians' slide into works-righteousness is perhaps never indicated more clearly than in Galatians 5:12. Many English translations tone down the language here, but Paul minced no words about the spiritual state of the Judaizers when he wished for them to castrate themselves. Paul did not expect this curse to be taken literally, of course; rather, he spoke in hyperbole to make a point. Ironically, those wanting to make circumcision necessary for salvation could be barred from the Lord's assembly according to the letter of the Law, if they took the knife one step further (Deut. 23:1). Paul only desired consistency – the insistence on circumcising Gentiles proved the false teachers did not affirm the spirit of the Law, so they should go all the way with the cutting and get kicked out of the covenant community. Priests of the pagan cult of Cybele also practiced self-mutilation, so Paul also likely intended his curse to reveal the Judaizers as no more trustworthy than idolaters.

The false teachers' attempt to define the Christian life according to circumcision and the rest of the Mosaic law was probably well-intentioned. After all, has it not been commonly assumed throughout history that faith in Christ and gospel freedom will produce licentiousness unless law becomes the defining mark of the church? Are not God's people tempted today to view Christian obligation in terms of a code that forbids practices like drinking, dancing, and so on just because somebody might abuse them? These fears are not entirely unfounded; from the start people have taken advantage of the Lord's mercy and have misread the gospel of grace as a license for sin (Rom. 6:15-16).

Martin Luther comments that people can pervert God's free grace into licentiousness. But he also says grace must be preached as no one can be saved otherwise. Moreover, those who use grace to excuse immorality reveal that they have missed the true gospel, for Galatians 5:13 says that our flesh, the corruption that remains in us until death, must not be allowed to indulge itself out of "freedom." To give into corrupt desires is not liberation, for we can be overpowered by transgression when we make no attempt to stand against it.

GALATIANS 5:12-13

–“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” – (v. 13).