

THE ONLY THING THAT COUNTS

by Angela Stauffer

KEY VERSE:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

Galatians 5:13

FAITH STORY:

Galatians 5:1-26

FAITH FOCUS:

In this passage Paul talks about freedom and radical inner change. He wants people to quit worrying about the rules and focus on serving one another in love. This causes tension because more freedom may mean a loose morality. However, Christians can live in this tension because of an inner change that occurs in their lives. Paul is not saying that it's okay to get drunk and live in selfish ambition; he is saying that freedom was given so that humanity does not have to worry about doing enough to please God. Rather, he wants us to focus on serving one another in love because of the inner change that has occurred. This is a passage that sets us free from the rules and allows us to live by the Spirit through inner conviction.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students understand that true faith doesn't need to rely on outward rules, but on an inner transformation from the Spirit.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Help students understand that obeying Christian rules and doctrine won't get them into heaven.
- Help students realize that freedom in Christ doesn't mean a free ticket to loose morality.
- Help students understand that when a person is transformed inwardly by the Holy Spirit, the fruits of the Spirit will begin to come naturally as they remain focused on God and hearing God's voice.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Leg weights, heavy clothes, chains—anything that you can attach to the students to make it hard for them to run.
- 2 Baskets or boxes for students to carry with weighty things in them, such as cans of fruit and vegetables.
- 3 Assemble a number of things that students can pick from to represent the barriers in their life. (Random household items are fine—let the students use their creativity to make the connections.)

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (10 minutes)

Welcome students, then explain that everyone is going to go for a short run now at the beginning of the class. Before they go, however, make each student put on some sort of restraint (as listed above) and carry a basket or box of items.

CONNECT: (5–10 minutes)

After the short jog, bring students back together and ask:

Why do you think you had to run wearing those restraints? What point do you think we're trying to make?

Allow students to come up with as many answers as they can. Then say:

If you agree with this statement, keep your weights on. If you disagree, take them off:

"Sometimes following the rules of being a Christian feels like running upstream or running with weights on our legs."

Ask students to explain why they still have their weights on or why they took them off. What are examples from their lives that support their agreement or disagreement with the statement?

Transition statement: *Let's see what Paul had to say about following the rules of being a Christian—you might just be surprised by what you find out.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (20 minutes)

Read the passage together as a class. Then do a mini lecture and explain these points.

- 1 "Judaizers" were Christian Jews who thought that you had to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law to be saved.
- 2 "Judaizers" told new Christians (called Gentiles) that they had to be circumcised in order to be saved.
- 3 Paul said that if Gentiles got circumcised, then they would have to obey the whole law, which nobody can do. (This can be like running with chains on our legs.)
- 4 Paul also said that people are saved by God's grace, not by obedience to the law. To Paul, those who follow all of the rules to gain God's favor and be saved are forfeiting their rights in Jesus Christ, because they are relying on themselves to get in the gates of heaven rather than on the grace that Jesus provided us on the cross.

Stop at this point and ask students:

How does this sound? Is there anything that feels potentially dangerous about what you've heard Paul say so far?

(The idea that this gives us freedom to follow our lustful, selfish, sinful desires and say that we didn't feel it was wrong.)

Ask students to look at verse 13 and read it again:

Explain: *“We are freed from the curse of the law but not from the moral law of God” (Harper). We still have rules, but God will not base his love for us or our salvation on those rules because he already provided the one and only way to him through his son on the cross and he won’t take that back. However, if we are serious about our faith, inner conviction must shape our actions.*

Ask for questions and comments. Discuss:

- Why do believers do good works?
- What does it mean if we don’t produce the fruits of the Spirit naturally? Are we not Christians? Or does this transformation just take time? (The fruits of the spirit are found in verse 22.)

APPLY: (10 minutes)

Ask students to think about their lives and the difficulties they face in producing the fruits of the Spirit. Share these examples but encourage students to think of their own barriers that may be different from these.

- Is it a bad definition of Christianity that says it’s all about rules, and they don’t want to be a part of that?
- Is it a fear of letting the Spirit in?
- Is it an unwillingness to believe in God’s grace?
- Do they know an adult figure who says he or she is a Christian but doesn’t act like it, and they don’t want to be like them?
- Have they had a bad experience in life and just don’t know how to let the Spirit take away the guilt or pain so that God can be in control rather than the pain or guilt?

Ask students to choose an object that could symbolize their barrier with letting the Spirit control their life. Invite them to share but allow persons to pass if they prefer not to share.

RESPOND: (10 minutes)

Invite students to get into groups of 2-3 to pray for each other. Ask them to commit to being prayer partners for the week and to check up on each other to see how they are doing in their efforts to overcome the barriers to letting God’s Spirit control their lives. If a student doesn’t feel they can trust another student, you or another adult leader can be their prayer partner.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

In Christ we receive freedom. Christ sets us free from the law, from the curse of the law, from the fear of death, and from sin. However, liberty and freedom in Christ cannot become a free-for-all. It cannot become a pass to do whatever you want or indulge in sin because you are free. According to the Harper Study Bible, “Liberty brings believers by voluntary choice into total submission to Jesus Christ and his will for us.” So, being a slave to Christ really brings the truest, greatest freedom that can be found.

The Judaizers said that men must be circumcised and obey the law in order to be saved, but this is obviously not the teaching of Jesus Christ. Paul says that is not true because in believing this they are taking the power away from Christ and placing it in their own hands, and ultimately missing the point of Jesus Christ completely. Paul knows that circumcision has no bearing on the kingdom of God or those who will enter the gates of heaven. "In Christ the law no longer exercises dominion over us" (Harper Study Bible).

We have to also remember that we were not given freedom to use it to gratify our sinful desires but rather to serve others in love. The Spirit and sinful desires are opposite and run in opposite directions. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot pursue the bad things of this world and say we follow Christ and live by the Spirit because they are not co-workers. There is no law against the fruits of the Spirit because for Christians those fruits become the desire of the heart and we want to do these things out of reverence for our Lord and Savior. The true desires of one's heart show in the actions that are lived out. Jesus calls us to serve others in love and humility.

Finally, as Christians, we lose our rights. Our rights become privileges. It is a privilege to serve Christ and we are given the fruits of the Spirit as an inheritance for accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior.