



JULY STUDY GUIDE

This study paper is designed to help you navigate the tension between personal liberty and spiritual responsibility. It explores how true freedom isn't found in doing whatever we want, but in becoming who we were created to be.

Introduction: Freedom

In our modern society, "freedom" is often defined as the total absence of restraint. We are told that to be truly free, we must be able to do what we want, when we want, with whomever we want, without anyone telling us "no." This version of freedom focuses entirely on the individual—my rights, my choices, and my happiness. However, this "unrestricted" freedom often leads to a different kind of bondage: the slavery of our own impulses. When there are no boundaries, we don't become freer; we become like a ship without a rudder, tossed about by every passing wave of emotion or cultural trend.

Biblical freedom operates on a completely different principle. The New Testament writers, particularly Paul and Peter, suggest that we were set free from the power of sin not so we could do "nothing," but so we could finally do "something" of eternal value. In the Kingdom of God, freedom is not "freedom from" responsibility; it is the "freedom to" serve. It is the liberation of the soul from the weight of selfishness so that we can finally see and care for the people around us. It is the difference between a wildfire that destroys everything in its path and a controlled fire in a fireplace that provides warmth and light to a home.

This study explores the concept of Stewardship—the idea that our lives, our time, and our freedom are actually "on loan" from God. If we are stewards, we are managers of a gift, not owners of a commodity.

We will look at how to use our liberty as a "bridge" to others rather than a "shield" for ourselves. We will discuss the "everyday" ways our happiness affects our neighbors and how to move from a life of chaos to one of purposeful, servant-hearted freedom.

Section 1: The Rudderless Ship

Core Scripture

Galatians 5:13 — "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."

The Concept

Freedom without a purpose is just chaos. Paul warns that if we use our freedom just to satisfy our own cravings ("the flesh"), we end up destroying ourselves and the people around us.

Here is a breakdown of this concept

The Big Idea: Freedom vs. Chaos

Think about a car. If you take it out into an open desert with no roads, no traffic laws, and no destination, you have total "freedom" to drive wherever you want. But without a map, a purpose, or any boundaries, you're likely to get lost, run out of gas, or crash into a ditch.

That is what Paul is talking about. True freedom isn't the ability to do whatever you want, whenever you want. That's just chaos.

Breaking It Down

1. The Trap of "Doing Me"

In everyday life, we often hear advice like "do whatever makes you happy" or "you do you." While it sounds liberating, Paul points out a major flaw: when our only goal is satisfying our immediate cravings (what the Bible calls "the flesh"), we become slaves to our impulses.

If you give in to every urge to snap at someone, procrastinate, or indulge in bad habits, you aren't free.

You're just being controlled by your moods and desires.

2. The Ripple Effect

Selfish freedom doesn't just hurt us; it wrecks our relationships. When everyone in a friend group, a family, or a community is only looking out for number one, things break down fast. Paul warns that we end up "biting and devouring" one another. It turns life into a competition where everyone loses.

The Reality Check

A life focused entirely on self-gratification always ends up lonely and destructive.

The Better Way: Freedom With a Target

So, what is freedom for? Paul argues that true freedom is meant to be anchored by love and purpose.

Freedom too, not just freedom from:

You have been set free from the power of destructive habits, and now you are free to serve others and build something meaningful.

The Ultimate Paradox

Real freedom looks like choosing to use your life to lift other people up. When you aren't trapped by your own ego or cravings, you are finally free to love people authentically.

Discussion Questions for the Group

Can you think of a time when having absolutely no rules or plans made things worse or more stressful?

What are some examples of "cravings" or impulses today that promise happiness but usually end up causing drama or regret?

How does shifting our mindset from "What do I want right now?" to "How can I serve the people around me?" change how we live out our daily freedom?

Layman's Terms

Imagine a train that decides it wants to be "free" from the tracks. It can go anywhere it wants for about five seconds before it crashes. The tracks aren't there to limit the train; they are there to make the train functional.

Food for Thought

Where in your life has "doing whatever I want" made you feel more stressed or trapped?

Section 2: The "Slaves of God" Paradox

Core Scripture

1 Peter 2:16 — "Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves."

The Concept

This sounds contradictory. How can you be "free" and a "slave" at the same time? Peter says we are all serving something. We are either slaves to our anger, our greed, and our ego, or we are servants of a loving God.

It sounds like a massive contradiction at first glance.

How can you be "free" if you're called a "servant" or a "slave"?

The core of what Peter (and Paul) are getting at is a powerful truth about human nature:

Human beings are wired to worship and serve something. We never actually operate in a vacuum of total independence. We are always giving our time, energy, and devotion to something.

Here is how to break down this paradox using everyday language for your study.

The Illusion of Total Independence

We like to think of freedom as a blank check—no rules, no masters, just us making choices. But Peter challenges this illusion. He points out that if we aren't consciously choosing what we serve, our default settings take over.

If you think you are completely independent, ask yourself:

Can you easily stop being anxious when you want to?

Can you instantly turn off pride, greed, or the need for approval?

When we try to be our own ultimate boss, we usually just end up enslaved to our own impulses, coping mechanisms, or others' expectations. You might be "free" from God's guidelines, but you're now a slave to your own temper, your phone, or your bank account.

The Two Kinds of Masters

The Bible simplifies life down to two operating systems. Everyone is running on one or the other:

1. Serving the Self / The World

2. Serving a Loving God

The Paradox: Surrender is Where Freedom Starts

Think of it like a fish. A fish is only truly "free" to be a fish when it is limited to the water. If it demands the "freedom" to live on dry land, it dies. The water looks like a boundary, but it's the exact environment the fish needs to thrive.

In the same way, serving God isn't about putting on handcuffs; it's about putting the fish back in the water.

The Big Takeaway

True freedom isn't the absence of a master. True freedom is finding a Master who loves you, treats you with grace, and commands you to do things that lead to your ultimate joy and thriving.

When you choose to be a servant of God, you are finally set free from the grueling job of trying to save, protect, and validate yourself.

What do you think is the hardest part for people to accept about the idea that we are *always* serving something?

Everyday Application

If you are "free" to eat whatever you want, you eventually become a "slave" to poor health. If you are "free" to spend money however you want, you become a "slave" to debt. True freedom is choosing the "Master" who wants what is best for you.

Reflective Question

If you looked at your habits, who or what is actually "running the show" in your life right now?

Section 3: Stewardship of the "Yes"

Core Scripture

1 Corinthians 6:12 — "'I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but I will not be mastered by anything."

The Concept

Stewardship is the art of asking "Is this helpful?" instead of just "Is this allowed?" Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should.

This is the ultimate shift from a "rules-based" mindset to a "relationship-based" mindset. It moves us away from seeking loopholes and pushes us toward wisdom.

Here is how to break down this concept of stewardship using everyday language for your study.

The "Loophole" Mindset vs. The "Wisdom" Mindset

Most of us naturally grow up asking, "Is this allowed?" "Can I watch this show?"

"Is it technically a sin to do this?"

"How close to the edge can I get without falling in?"

When we live like this, we treat God like a strict referee, and we spend our time trying to see what we can get away with.

But Paul offers a completely different filter in 1 Corinthians 10:23, where he essentially says: "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial." In modern terms, just because you can doesn't mean you should.

Stewardship is realizing that our time, our bodies, our money, and our relationships don't belong to us—they are on loan from God. So the question changes from "What am I allowed to do with my stuff?" to "How can I best take care of what God trusted me with?"

The Smartphone Analogy

Think about owning a smartphone.

The "Is it allowed?" approach: You make sure you aren't doing anything explicitly illegal or terrible on it. You're technically in the clear.

The Stewardship Approach

You look at how you use it. Is spending four hours a day scrolling through feeds helpful to your mental health? Is it building up your relationships? Is it making you a better student, friend, or follower of Jesus? The phone isn't "bad," and scrolling isn't "allowed" or "disallowed" in a rulebook. But a good steward asks: "Is this the best use of the tool I've been given?"

The Big Takeaway

True maturity isn't about managing rules; it's about managing your life in a way that shows you value the One who gave it to you. Freedom without boundaries is chaos, but freedom directed by wisdom is where we start to thrive.

How do you think our daily habits would change if we stopped asking "Is this wrong?" and started asking "Is this helpful?"

Layman's Terms

You have the "right" to stay up all night playing night games, but it's not "beneficial" for your job performance the next morning. Stewardship is managing your "rights", so they don't turn into "wrongs."

Food for Thought

What is one "right" you have that you might need to give up for a season because it's not helping you grow?

Section 4: My Freedom, Your Welfare

Core Scripture

1 Corinthians 10:24 — "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others."

The Concept

This is the ultimate "filter" for Christian freedom. In a world that says, "Do what makes you happy," the Bible says, "Do what makes your neighbor whole."

This is where the rubber meets the road. It takes everything we've talked about—freedom, serving, and wisdom—and turns it outward. It is the ultimate shift from self-focus to neighbor-focus.

Here is how to bring this concept to life for a Bible study group.

The Clash of Two Worldviews

We are constantly bombarded with a cultural script that tells us the highest good in life is self-fulfillment. It sounds like this:

"Follow your heart."

"You have to look out for number one."

"If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad."

The problem is that a world where everyone is entirely focused on their own happiness becomes incredibly fractured. If my happiness gets in the way of yours, one of us must lose.

The Bible introduces a completely different filter. It doesn't ask, "Does this make me happy?" It asks, "Does this make the people around me whole?" (The biblical word for this wholeness is Shalom—peace, healing, and things being exactly as they should be).

The Ultimate Example

Think about a construction crew. If every worker on the site only did what made them happy, the guy with the hammer might just smash random walls, the painter might paint everything neon pink, and the plumber might just take a nap. The building would collapse.

Instead, they submit their individual freedom to the blueprint so that the building gets built.

As Christians, our "blueprint" is love. When Paul talks about freedom, he says we should use it to "build one another up." True Christian freedom isn't about demanding our rights; it's about willingly laying down our convenience so that someone else can experience God's love and wholeness through us.

The Big Takeaway

Chasing your own happiness is a dead end because it's never satisfying. But when you switch your focus to making the people around you whole, you find the deep joy and purpose you were looking for all along.

Why do you think our culture is so afraid of the idea of putting someone else's wholeness ahead of our own personal happiness?

Everyday Application

This shows up in how we speak. We might have the "right" to tell someone exactly what we think of them, but stewardship of our words means asking: "Will these words build them up or tear them down?"

Application

Think of a conflict you had this week. Did you use your "right to be right" to win the argument, or did you use your "freedom to serve" to bring peace?

Section 5: The Danger of the "Cover-Up"

Core Scripture

1 Peter 2:16 (Part B) — "...do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil."

The Concept

Sometimes we use the phrase "God understands" or "I'm under grace" as an excuse to keep doing things we know are harmful. This isn't freedom; it's a mask for self-destruction.

This is the ultimate confrontation with our own tendency to make excuses. It hits at the heart of how we can subtly twist beautiful truths like "grace" and "forgiveness" into a green light to keep doing things that are tearing us apart.

Here is how to unpack this concept using everyday language for your study.

The "Get Out of Jail Free" Card Mentality

We have all probably used or heard phrases like:

"God knows my heart."

"Nobody's perfect; I'm under grace."

"God will forgive me anyway."

When we use grace this way, we treat it like a "Get Out of Jail Free" card in Monopoly. We use it to bypass the consequences of our choices without wanting to change.

But the writers of the New Testament—especially Paul in Romans 6—strongly push back on this. He basically asks, "Should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more grace? Absolutely not!" Using grace as an excuse to keep making destructive choices isn't walking in freedom. It's like someone staying inside a burning building just because they know the fire department has a good insurance policy.

The Car Dashboard Analogy

Imagine you are driving and the "Check Engine" light flashes on your dashboard. You know there's a problem under the hood.

Instead of fixing the engine, you take a piece of black tape and cover up the light, so you don't have to look at it. You tell yourself, "It's fine, the car still drives, and the manufacturer made a really reliable vehicle." Saying "God understands" while continuing in a harmful habit is putting black tape over the dashboard light. The light isn't the problem; it's a warning that something deep inside is breaking down. God's grace isn't meant to hide the warning lights; it's meant to give us the power and support to pop the hood and fix the underlying issue.

The Big Takeaway

True grace doesn't leave us where it found us. It doesn't just forgive our past; it empowers our future. If our understanding of "freedom in Christ" allows us to comfortably stay stuck in habits that destroy our peace, our relationships, or our health, then we aren't experiencing freedom at all—we're just wearing a mask while we self-destruct.

Why do you think it is so easy for us to confuse God's patience and kindness with Him giving us permission to stay the same?

Layman's Terms

It's like a teenager with a car who says, "My parents gave me this car so I'm free!" and then uses it to drive to places they aren't supposed to go. They are using the gift to disrespect the Giver.

Reflective Question

Are there areas in your life where you are calling something "freedom" when it's just a habit you're afraid to quit?

Section 6: The Law of Love

Core Scripture

Galatians 5:14 — "For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The Concept

When we live for ourselves, we have a thousand rules we must keep track of. When we love others, the rules take care of themselves. If you love your neighbor, you won't steal from them, lie to them, or envy them.

This is the mic-drop moment of the entire discussion. It takes all the pressure off trying to be "perfect" by shifting our focus from a checklist of rules to a single, powerful relationship goal.

Here is how to break down this concept for a Bible study group.

The Exhaustion of the Checklist Life

Imagine trying to maintain a friendship with a manual of 1,000 rules to follow: Rule 42: Smile for at least 3 seconds when greeting them. Rule 117: Do not take their food without asking. Rule 504: text them back within 12 minutes. You would be constantly

stressed, second-guessing yourself, and completely exhausted. You wouldn't be a friend; you'd just be an anxious rule-follower.

This is exactly what life feels like when we focus entirely on "not messing up." We get bogged down by a massive mental checklist of things we shouldn't do.

Paul simplifies all of this in Romans 13:9, saying that all the commandments—do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet—are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The Ultimate Shortcut: Love Does the Math

When you love someone, the rules become completely automatic. You don't need a rulebook to know how to treat them well, because your heart is already pointed in the right direction.

Look at how love naturally takes care of the "Thou Shalt Nots":

The Rule: Do not steal

The Love Reality: If I genuinely love you, I want you to thrive. I'm not going to take what belongs to you because that would hurt you.

The Rule: Do not lie

The Love Reality: If I respect you, I'll be honest with you. Trust is the foundation of love.

The Rule: Do not envy

The Love Reality: If I love you, your wins are my wins. I'm going to celebrate your success instead of wishing it were mine.

The Guardrail vs. The Steering Wheel

Think of the rules like guardrails on a cliffside road.

If you are a bad driver (living entirely for yourself), you need those guardrails to keep you from driving off the edge and crashing.

But if you have your hands firmly on the steering wheel and your eyes on the destination (living to love others), you don't spend your drive bumping into the guardrails. You naturally stay on the road because you drive properly.

The Big Takeaway

Stop focusing so much on what you can't do, and start focusing on who you can love. When love becomes your main goal, the rules don't disappear—they just take care of themselves.

Everyday Application

Stewardship isn't about being a "rule-follower"; it's about being a "love-steward." If you manage your life through the lens of love, you will always be free.

Food for Thought

How would your "to-do list" change if the top priority was "How can I make someone else's day easier?"

Section 7: The Freedom to be Forgotten

Core Scripture

Philippians 2:3–4 — "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves..."

The Concept

The most "enslaved" person is the one who is constantly worried about their reputation, their status, and whether they are getting enough credit. True freedom is the "freedom to be forgotten"—to serve quietly without needing a "thank you."

This concept cuts right through the noise of our social-media-driven, clout-chasing culture. It completely flips our definition of "success" on its head by showing that the desire to be noticed is a cage.

Here is how to share this liberating truth with your Bible study group using everyday language.

The Exhausting Jail of the "Like" Count

Think about how much energy it takes to constantly maintain an image. When you live for your reputation, your status, or getting the credit, you are essentially letting other people run your life.

If someone doesn't text you back fast enough, your day is ruined.

If you don't get recognized for a good deed, you feel bitter.

If someone criticizes you, your entire identity feels threatened.

This isn't freedom; it's a high-stress job that you can never quit. You become a slave to the opinions of people who are usually too caught up in their own lives to think about you anyway.

The "Freedom to be Forgotten"

The Bible offers a radical alternative: the freedom to be forgotten.

This doesn't mean you don't matter or that you should be a doormat. It means your sense of worth is so completely secure in God's love that you no longer need the crowd's applause to feel valuable.

When Jesus talks about doing your good deeds in secret (Matthew 6), He isn't trying to hide your light. He is trying to protect your heart. He's saying, "If you do it for the applause, the applause is all the reward you'll get. But if you do it for Me, you are free from the pressure of the crowd."

The Big Takeaway

True freedom is the ability to walk into a room and think, "How can I serve these people?" instead of "What do these people think of me?" When you don't need the credit, nobody can take your joy away. You are finally free to love without strings attached.

Layman's Terms

Think of the person who cleans up the coffee spill in the church lobby when no one is looking. They aren't doing it for the "likes" on social media; they are free from the need for attention.

Closing Action

This week, perform one "Secret Act of Stewardship." Do something helpful for someone else and tell absolutely no one. Experience the freedom of serving without the burden of seeking credit.