

Galatians: Human Freedom

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[0 : 00] So delighted to be together this morning. I'm so happy we can be here and worship as we do every week. We've been in a series looking at this amazing, explosive letter to the Galatians that Paul wrote long ago, and we're finding again and again and again how relevant this letter is for us today.

Especially this week, we are talking about the topic, the focus, the idea of freedom. And freedom is not something that I have to convince you is important.

Everybody in our society values freedom. We all agree that freedom is important. Where things begin to go awry is when we try to figure out what does freedom mean?

How do you define it? And then how do we go about actually securing freedom? What measures should we take? You know, when we think about freedom, we all automatically have to ask all kinds of questions.

What does human freedom look like? You know, is human freedom life without limits? Is it life where I can do whatever I want, be whomever I want?

[1 : 14] Or is freedom life with the right limits? How do we define freedom? What happens when my freedom impinges upon your freedom?

Right? Because we can't just think about individual freedom. We have to think about what that looks like in society. And what happens when our freedoms crash against one another. In 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously declared four fundamental freedoms that he said people everywhere in the world should be able to enjoy.

The freedom of speech. Freedom of worship. Freedom from want. Freedom from fear. These are freedoms that he said everyone should have.

Everyone should enjoy. Obviously, this is right before the U.S. gets involved in World War II. And innumerable lives are lost and massive cost to secure these freedoms.

Because the belief was these freedoms are worth whatever the cost. And at this point in Paul's letter, we see something similar happening.

[2 : 21] As important as those freedoms that Roosevelt articulated are, there is a kind of freedom that is even more important and more fundamental. And Paul is essentially saying, whatever it costs, it's worth it.

Because this is the most important kind of freedom there is. And it's the freedom that comes through the gospel. And so what we're going to do is look at chapter 5, the first 15 verses, and we're going to see that the gospel gives us this freedom.

It frees us from something. But it also frees us for something. There's a purpose to the freedom that we gain in Jesus Christ. So we're going to look at what it frees us from.

And then we're going to look at what it frees us for. So let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that every week we can come and join together.

And we're invited to sit under your word. Rather than scrutinizing it, we pray that your word would scrutinize us. Lord, rather than trying to see what your word would reveal, we pray that your word would reveal us.

[3 : 23] That it would expose our hearts. That it would remind us once again why we are so desperately in need of your grace. We pray this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. So first of all, the gospel frees us from something.

Verses 1 through 12. These verses essentially tell us that the gospel sets us free from a life that is defined by two things.

Number one, the gospel sets us free from a life that is defined by guilt. Guilt. When I think about guilt, I think about the fourth grade.

And I think about a particular time in the fourth grade where there were a bunch of kids. They were kind of the cool kids in my class and kind of in the school. And they did something really horrible. They were really picking on this other kid. And I could have intervened. I could have maybe put a stop to it. But I didn't. And instead what I did was I joined in this bad thing that they were doing. [4 : 25] And obviously the reason that I did that was because I wanted those kids to accept me and include me. And I thought if I did that, they would then include me in their group and I could be one of them.

And that was in the fourth grade. And this is over 30 years. This was well over 30 years ago. And a long time ago, it still haunts me. I still wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning.

Every now and then. Clammy, sweaty, thinking about that. And wishing that I had made a different choice. Wishing that I had been the kid that intervened.

And this haunts me. And I know that probably for many of you, there are similar kinds of things in your life. No offense, but most of us have lived long enough to have those experiences where they haunt you.

And it could be big things. It could be people that you've hurt. Damage that you've done. It could be broken relationships. It could be ways that you know you wronged or deceived. Or it could be little things. Some people are haunted by the memory that they forgot to send a thank you card.

[5 : 29] For that thing. The wedding gift from 15 years ago. I never sent the thank you. But whatever it is, I think that we're all kind of haunted by guilt. There's this nagging sense of guilt.

And what the Bible would say about that is that in fact the reason that we're haunted by guilt is because we are in fact guilty. Right? That's the kind of painful truth of the gospel. It doesn't say, oh, don't worry about it.

It's not that big a deal. It says, oh, it's actually worse than you think. And the gospel, you know, scripture says that first of all, we all have personal sin of which we are guilty right now.

Right? That we are people who were created by God for his good purposes. For his divine purposes. And yet it says that we've rejected God.

We've rejected his purposes in favor of ourselves and our agendas. We've sort of set ourselves up as a kind of, you know, substitute gods. And because we've done that, because we're denying God in the world that he made, we are guilty.

[6 : 35] And it says that we're born guilty. You know, we're born as children of the rebellion. We're not born as the good guys. We're born as the bad guys. And then moreover, beyond personal sin, there's this reality in our world of systemic sin.

Systemic sin, right? So if you're familiar with St. Augustine and you read City of God, his masterful work, comparing the city of man, the city of human beings, and then the city of God.

What you see is that he is, at many points throughout that work, drawing the connection between personal sin and personal corruption and systemic sin.

The way that sin gets worked into and wired into the institutions and practices and policies and procedures that we create. And he says, you know, corruption in our hearts leads to corrupt institutions and corrupt practices.

So when we look at the reality that we looked at a few weeks ago, realities like racism, and we talk about the fact that we can be here and now ideologically opposed to racism, and yet still every day tacitly benefiting from racist policies that have long, long ago been outlawed, and yet they continue to impact our world.

[7 : 53] When we talk about things like that, we're talking about systemic sin that flows from a heart that is corrupted by the sin of racism, right? Racial preference. We look at realities like environmental degradation and exploitation, and that's a systemic sin that flows out of a heart that is corrupted by greed and apathy, right?

You look at systemic sin like sex trafficking, and that's rooted in a heart that is corrupted by lust and greed, right?

These are systemic realities that exist, and so it's important to recognize this because in my experience, people on the theologically conservative end of the spectrum are happy to focus on personal sin.

But they very much minimize the reality of systemic sin, right? And on the other side, people on the kind of theological left are very happy to talk about systemic sin, but they minimize personal sin.

And what the Bible says, the reality we need to wrestle with is they're both real, and we are guilty of all of it. We participate and live within all of it. And so we need to recognize that.

[9 : 06] The gospel says that we're guilty of both. We stand condemned. Now, that's the first thing the gospel frees us from, which we'll get to in a minute, but there's another thing that we need freedom from, and that is what you might call the religion of achievement.

The religion of achievement, verses 6 through 12. When Paul is talking about circumcision, it's hard for us to connect with the meaning of circumcision in their culture, but it was essentially, one of the commentaries says, this represented a religion of achievement.

It's a religion based on the idea that I, through my good works, through these external symbols of righteousness, can achieve blessing, can earn salvation.

And you can apply that way of thinking to any religion of achievement. Most religions in the world are religions of achievement. You know, you work to achieve moral excellence, or divine blessing, or transcendental bliss.

You know, whether it's adopting a set of principles and living by them, whether it's wearing a certain kind of clothing, whether it's adopting a set of practices like transcendental meditation, you devote yourself to the work and you earn the blessing.

[10 : 15] But the thing that we need to recognize is, even secular, non-religious people live under the religion of achievement, what you might call the iron law of achievement.

You know, there are all kinds. I mean, just think about the society that we live in. There are all kinds of ways that our culture tells us that we are only as good as our resumes.

Right? That we are only worth what our accomplishments would say we are worth. You know, and there are a lot of people in this city who are gutting it out in PhD programs who probably shouldn't be there.

Who are gutting it out in jobs they hate because they're trying to prove their worth. They're trying to matter. And they're appealing to the standard of this religion of achievement that is pervasive.

Right? And in our culture, it's not okay to just be average. We have to be the best. We have to be amazing. Right? We have to be extraordinary.

[11 : 21] Top of the heap. And, you know, one of the weird things about being in your 40s is that you've reached a point in life where you had all of these things that you planned to achieve that you thought were going to give you worth and you were going to be somebody.

And you're at a point in life where you realize that that's probably not going to happen. And you start to kind of close doors on all those things that you were planning to do one day. And every door that closes feels like a blow to your self-worth.

I'm not going to be quite the somebody I thought I was going to be. It's painful. Right? This is why turning 40 is hard. It's why this decade is so painful for people. So we have these two realities, guilt and achievement.

We have this need to atone for guilt. We have this need to prove our worth. And they're pervasive. And they haunt us. And as Paul would say, they enslave us. You know, being enslaved means you can't say no to it.

And, you know, you try to say no to the guilt. You try to say no to that sense that you need to prove yourself. But it just comes right back and says, uh-uh. You belong to me. Right? So now look at what Paul says in verse 15.

[12 : 27] As if that was bad enough. Right? That was the kind of bad news. This is the really bad news. Here's what happens in verse 15. He says, but if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Now, what in the world is he talking about? What happens when you have a world full of people who are driven by the need to atone for their guilt? They're haunted by guilt and driven by the desire to prove their worth.

And what happens when you have a society full of people who are driven that way and they don't have God? They only have one another. Well, what happens is you begin to compare yourself to everybody around you.

The only way you know whether you're atoning, the only way you know, the only standard you have for achievement is how you're doing relative to everybody around you. And so what ends up happening is you begin to, you know, you begin to realize that if I can tear this person down and build myself up, I can feel better about myself.

Right? My achievements only matter if they're better than your achievements. Right? And so, you know, you have a group of people who aren't married and they hang out on the weekends and then one person gets married.

[13 : 34] And what happens? Right? Or you have a bunch of people who are colleagues in a workplace and then one person gets promoted. Right? And there's that kind of a weird emotional war that sets in where you're kind of happy for the person but you kind of hate them.

You know? And you kind of resent them. Right? Why? Why? It's all about this comparison that is happening all the time. Right? There's this great image. I don't know if you're familiar with the children's book, Hope for the Flowers.

Have you ever seen this book? Hope for the Flowers is fascinating because it's about caterpillars. And it's about, there's this, the main character comes along one day when he's a young caterpillar and he sees this gigantic caterpillar pillar.

It's like literally a tower of caterpillars going up into the clouds. And all of these caterpillars at the bottom are so excited to get started and they're all having to, trying to climb up the pillar.

And nobody knows. You can't see what's at the top of the pillar but all, they all agree it has to be amazing because all of these people are climbing. All these caterpillars. Right? So it has to be worth it. And so, but the trick is, it's a caterpillar pillar.

[14 : 38] So, you have to climb on top of and bite and devour other caterpillars in order to climb. It's the only way to go up. And so, this caterpillar begins to climb and he climbs and he climbs and he climbs.

And he bites and devours and steps on and squashes all of these other caterpillars. And the more he does it, the better he gets at it. And he climbs higher and he climbs higher and he climbs higher. And of course, when the main character finally gets to the top, there's only just a few caterpillars hanging on for dear life. And he realizes there's nothing up there. And he's over the clouds at this point.

He's over the mist. And then he looks out and he sees for miles around all of these other pillars. All of these other caterpillar towers. And all these other caterpillars getting to the top and looking around and seeing each other.

And he realizes there's nothing up there. And, you know, it shows, you know, no matter what pillar we're trying to climb, you know, whether it's academic achievement, whether it's financial success and building a business, whether it's making a difference and having an impact in the world, you know, there's nothing at the top.

[15 : 46] There's nothing up there. It's the Tower of Babel. It just reaches into the sky. And stands there, you know, this caterpillar pillar. It's meaningless. You know, Jim Carrey in his 2016 Golden Globe speech.

It's really great. He gets up and he introduces himself. He says, I am two-time Golden Globe award winner Jim Carrey.

And everybody laughs. And he says, And when I go to sleep at night, I'm not just some regular guy going to sleep. I'm two-time Golden Globe award winner Jim Carrey getting some well-deserved shut-eye.

And he says, And when I dream dreams, I don't just dream regular dreams. No, sir. I dream about being three-time Golden Globe award winner Jim Carrey.

Because then I will be enough. And it will finally be true. And I can stop this terrible search for that which I know will never fulfill me.

[16 : 55] And it's this moment where the audience is laughing and yet you realize that they're also starting to get what he's actually saying.

Because then he says, But these awards are really important. And everybody kind of knows that he's actually just said the opposite, right?

And it's this brilliant moment, you know, where it kind of exposes these towers for what they really are. And so what the Bible is telling us is if we live our lives trying to atone for sin and prove our worth, we're never going to arrive.

You know, it'll never be enough. There'll never be a point in your life, not when you're 40, 50, 60, when you say, I'm finally here, it's finally enough, I finally can stop. You'll never arrive. It will never come.

And we can end up doing an enormous amount of damage to the people that matter to us, to the world around us, if all we do is climb. And so this is why Paul is so emphatic.

[17:56] You can't miss verse 12. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. I mean, this is Paul. There's no way to kind of do exegetical gymnastics around what Paul is saying.

I mean, you know, this is why we dismiss the kids, right? I mean, Paul is literally saying, you think that you're awesome because you cut your foreskin off. Why not just go all the way?

That's what he's saying. And he's being sarcastic and he's angry because he recognizes the enormous damage that can be done to the human heart and to human society when this is how we live.

And he says, who would in their right mind encourage that? You must be insane. You know, why don't you emasculate yourself? And he's saying that because he realizes that the gospel offers something so infinitely better.

It's the good news of God's forgiveness that comes through grace. It's the realization that sin is far too deep and far too vast for us to ever be able to deal with on our own.

[19:00] Even if we could fix all of the systemic sin and brokenness in the world, there's still the reality of personal sin that we can never deal with. And so the gospel says that the only one who can actually deal with sin once and for all is Jesus Christ through his death on the cross.

You know, Jesus pays for our sin, but it's not just about forgiveness. It's also about adoption. The other major theme in Galatians where God actually adopts people into his family and pronounces upon them the status of sonship.

For men and women, this means gaining the place of greatest prominence and honor in God's kingdom. So freedom, true freedom, as scripture defines it, is knowing that no matter what your life looks like, no matter what your resume looks like, you belong to God and your future is secure. That's freedom. Freedom from this inescapable drive to atone and achieve. That's what freedom looks like.

Freedom also has a purpose behind it. There's a reason that God has accomplished this. I want to spend just a few minutes looking at this. We won't need as long. It's just verses 13, 14, and 15.

[20:16] The writer Susan Ertz, I love this quote. I saw it on a wall years ago. She says, millions long for immortality who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

And I love that because I feel like you could apply the same thing to freedom. You know, millions long for freedom, fight for freedom, talk about freedom who have no idea what to do with freedom, who have no idea what freedom is for.

You know, the Bible has a very nuanced understanding of freedom. The Bible recognizes that many kinds of freedom, what we would call freedom, actually cause harm. Right?

So you're free to disregard all of the traffic laws. You're technically free to go do that. But very quickly, your freedom is going to crash into literally other people's freedom.

Right? And you're probably going to cause damage. You're free to go eat and drink as much as you want. There's no regulation on that. There's no law against you just eating whatever you want, drinking as much as you want.

[21:15] Go indulge. Be free. But very soon, you're either going to die or you're going to get in a car and kill somebody else or you're going to become enslaved to those things.

And this is where the Bible is so fascinating because it has this tremendous insight that unbridled license for human beings often is a road right back into slavery.

I'm free. I'm free. I'm free. And then I need, I need, I need. And then all of a sudden you're a slave again. And this is what Paul's saying. You were set free to be free. Why go back into slavery? Of any kind. So many kinds of freedom actually lead into slavery.

You know, you're free to romantically pursue whomever you want. But if you do that again and again and again and again and pursue and hook up and pursue and hook up, you're going to leave a wake of destruction.

On the one hand, the gospel gives us freedom. But on the other hand, the gospel gives us freedom for a specific purpose. Galatians 5.13, For you were called to freedom, brothers.

[22:23] Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. This is why the gospel frees us, so that we can love and serve one another.

That's the purpose of Christian freedom. And because the gospel sets us free, right, it sets us free from atonement, it sets us free from achievement, it actually sets us free to really and truly love and

serve other people.

Because my sense is that it's very easy to do good in the world as a way of trying to atone, or to do good in the world as a way to try to prove our worth. My sense is that the social justice world is full of people who are trying to atone for their sin and who are trying to prove their worth.

And that's not what Christian freedom is about. Christian freedom actually says those things have been dealt with in your life. So now you can serve in a way that's not about you. It's actually about the person that you're loving and serving.

It's actually about God. So this is the way the gospel sets us free. And when we do this, when we, when we out of that freedom give our lives to serving other people, we're doing what God made us to do.

[23 : 36] And this is the weird reality of freedom is that God sets us free and then we give ourselves to doing what God made us to do and then we become more human. So it's a, it's a freedom that humanizes rather than dehumanizes, which is what a lot of the other kinds of freedom actually do.

And this is actually what the world needs. The world right now needs men and women who have been freed from guilt, freed from the iron law of achievement, who are giving themselves fully in every sphere of society, in every career, in every workplace, in every corner of the planet. People who are wholly giving themselves to the love and service of God and our neighbors. This is what the world needs. This is what will knit the social fabric back together. And this is really what true freedom looks like.

The freedom to give yourself away and in doing so to gain yourself. This is what Jesus said. And to become more truly human. So when it comes to your guilt, when it comes to the guilt that you feel right now, the guilt that haunts you, whatever you wake up at three o'clock in the morning thinking about, don't give in to the temptation to say, oh, it doesn't matter.

Oh, it's not a big deal. Oh, I was just in fourth grade. That approach actually backfires. Because what will end up happening is you won't actually deal with your guilt and it will continue to haunt you.

[25 : 10] So don't give in to that temptation. Instead, Christians, when we feel that guilt, we admit, you know what, Lord, it's a lot worse even than I know. The things that I wake up thinking about are probably paltry compared to the things that I should be thinking about.

It's a lot worse than I know. We admit and we confess that to God and then we repent. We say, God, I want to be a new person and then we ask God to forgive us and then, and here's the key, we actually believe that God forgives us.

And then, guess what? Stop feeling guilty. Like right now. The thank you card you didn't send, the breakup that went horribly, the person, all of that, if you've confessed and repented, stop feeling guilty.

Stop it right now. No more guilt. Because here's the thing, I don't want to make you feel guilty, but if you continue feeling guilty, you're denying the cross. You're saying the cross didn't matter.

So if the cross is the cross and it actually happened, no more guilt. It's no longer allowed. With achievement, your value is not on what you achieve but on what Jesus Christ has achieved for you.

[26 : 20] Worth comes from the reality that God saw you and God realized that you were worth so much that he was willing to give whatever it takes to gain you.

And that's where your worth comes from. So here's what that looks like. Work hard. Be ambitious. Try to get promoted. Try to do the best you can.

Try to succeed. Try to grow professionally. Take every opportunity you can to pursue that path that God has put you on. Whatever that looks like. Whatever calling you're pursuing.

Whatever that vocation is, throw yourself fully into it. Be ambitious. Right? But don't do it because you think it makes you more worthy. Do it because it absolutely delights God to see you doing what he made you to do.

It delights him. That butterfly story or the caterpillar story, at the end of the caterpillar story, this caterpillar has spent years of his life climbing and by the end, he's hardened and he barely talks to anybody and he's kind of calcified in his heart.

[27 : 33] And all of a sudden, he sees a childhood friend of his and she floats up on the wind next to the pillar and she's gone through a transformation and she's become a butterfly.

And in a moment, he realizes that she can effortlessly go far higher than he ever will be able to after a lifetime of climbing. And it's such a beautiful picture of what Paul says in verse 15.

He says, or I'm sorry, in verse 5, he says, for through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. Righteousness. Righteousness is not something that we can earn or achieve or climb our way into.

It is something that we wait for. It's a gift that we're given through Jesus Christ. And so what this is telling us is the gospel is not behavior modification and the gospel is not moral reformation.

The gospel is spiritual transformation. God is working in us and one day we will be transformed and one day righteousness will come as easily to us as flight does to a butterfly.

[28 : 41] It will simply be natural. So until then, let us throw ourselves into the work of the kingdom. Let us live as free women and men, free from guilt, free from achievement.

Let us throw ourselves fully into every sphere, every corner of the city, every corner of the world.

And let us give ourselves fully to the work of freedom, to ensuring that as many people as possible are set free to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Let us pray. Thank you.