

Gospel Freedom

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[0 : 0 0] We are going to read together and think about gospel freedom, think about what freedom in Christ looks like as Paul describes it here. So let's hear God's word from Galatians chapter 5.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words, I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ. You have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

You are running a good race who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth. That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished.

As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves. You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.

Rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command. Love your neighbor as yourself. If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So, freedom in Christ, that's our theme for this morning. First thing to say is that Christianity is a rescue religion. It's there at the heart of so many of the stories that people perhaps know really well. The story of Noah rescued from the flood, as God tells him, to build an ark. Or Moses, the one who is sent by God in order to set the people of Israel free. King David, who was used even before he was king in order to free the Israelites from the terror of the Philistines and Goliath in particular. All stories of God acting in order to rescue his people, ultimately bringing us to Jesus, God's ultimate rescuer. So, it's there in our stories.

[3 : 1 8] It's also there in our language and vocabulary. We talk about a movement from death to life, about a transfer of kingdoms being taken from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light or the kingdom of the sun that God loves. And here in Galatians, we have the language of slavery being changed to freedom through grace in Jesus Christ. And this theme of rescue and deliverance, it's there in our fairy tales. It's there in our folk tales. We can think of the story of the princess locked in a castle in a forest, unable to find freedom, perhaps guarded by a dragon or a wicked witch. And who's the hero? The hero is the knight in shining armor, the brave prince who's riding through the forest and sees the fair maiden and vanquishes the dragon and sets the maiden free.

It's the gospel in folktale. Jesus is that hero. Jesus is the one who has come to rescue us, to set us free from the power of sin and also, as we find in Galatians, to set us free from the slavery of trying to prove ourselves, trying to earn our way into God's favor. Jesus is the one who defeats our enemies. In fact, he sacrifices himself so that we might be free. Now, we know that freedom is a big deal today. Brexit emerged from a desire to be free from the control of Europe.

Freedom of self-identity and self-expression are really high values right now. People desire freedom from oppression of various kinds. And what the Bible says to us is that Christianity offers what every heart longs for. It offers free, it offers true freedom because it offers freedom in Christ.

So, when we come to Galatians 5 and verse 1, it's a verse that's really central to all that Paul has been saying. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. And what he's going to do in this section, he's going to declare to us, here's what freedom in Christ is, and he's going to defend it over against works religion as he's been doing throughout the letter. And then he's going to begin to define in this section what that freedom in Christ looks like. How does it play itself out in everyday life?

And we'll see much more of that in subsequent weeks. But first of all, let's think about gospel freedom declared. Galatians 5 verse 1. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Okay, so why did Jesus come?

[6 : 19] Paul says Jesus came to carry out God's rescue mission so that we might be set free. So, we can picture ourselves locked in a prison cell or in chains as slaves with no freedom. Paul says Jesus came on a rescue mission to free us from, at the end of the verse, a yoke of slavery. And we understand from Galatians what Paul means by that. He means the slavery of thinking that acceptance from God comes from earning it or proving it by our goodness and law-keeping. And so, he says Jesus came to set us free from that. And he warns them not to be burdened again by that yoke of slavery. So, this is something they'd experienced in their past. So, even before they were Christians, when they were worshipping false gods, when they were serving the idols, they were making sacrifices and they were doing things hoping to earn the favor of the gods. Because that's an instinct within us. I need to do so that God will be pleased with me.

And now, in the present, they're being tempted to this way of thinking again. Only this time, it's couched in religious terms. To be moral and to be religious and to keep the Jewish law, false teachers are saying that's the path to freedom. And Paul is saying, no, that's the way to slavery.

And so, he reminds them that Jesus set them free, sets us free for freedom, not for a return to slavery.

So, Jesus has come to set us free to this struggle that maybe many of us have experienced of keeping the law, thinking that by keeping the law, we will earn our acceptance from God. That God will be more pleased with us now depending on our obedience. Jesus has also come to set us free from being overwhelmed by condemnation and guilt. Because we look to him and we understand that he has paid for sin, that he has paid the penalty for it so that we can live with freedom. So, Jesus has set us free from those things for this sense of security, knowing that in Christ, I am accepted by God and I have wonderful intimate access to God. I have this freedom for living with joy as a child of God, adopted into the family, as we thought about in chapter 4.

And how we get that freedom, Paul has said again and again in this letter, is not by our work, not by our effort, it's by trusting in Jesus' perfect work. It's by recognizing that he is perfectly obedient, where I am in, and that he has offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to deal with sin, to bring us to God. And therefore, because of all that, there is a command here in the middle of verse 1, stand firm then. It's a military language. Guard this gospel freedom with your life. He says to the church, stick together in defending and enjoying the gospel of God's grace to you in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[9 : 43] Like bodyguards, surround the gospel. Don't let any harm or distortion come to it. Don't preach a message that would suggest to people that they need to earn God's favor. Because as Galatians says to us, and as verse 1 says to us, there is a danger that we all face where we can disconnect our belief and our practice. So I can believe in my head that Jesus died on the cross for my sins, and because of that, God loves me, and I'm a child of God. But in my practice, I can still function more like a slave than a child, thinking if I have a good day morally, God will be more pleased with me. And if I have a bad day, then perhaps God will want no part of relationship with me. And so Paul again and again is bringing this message of grace, that grace gives us freedom, freedom to know and enjoy God for all of life, because it rests on what Jesus has done. So that's him declaring gospel freedom to us, and then he takes some time to defend gospel freedom in verses 2 to 12. He does it in two different ways. The first thing, in verses 2 to 6, he emphasizes that freedom comes when our faith is in Jesus, not in our own law-keeping. So again, we've seen this as we've looked through the letter of

Galatians. It highlights two mutually exclusive ideas, two ideas that are totally opposed to one another. It's that either we are saved by grace, that's Paul's message, that's the Bible's message, or we're saved by works, and that was the message of the false teachers. Either our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ, or it's in circumcision, as they're speaking about here in these verses. Now, why does Paul draw attention to circumcision? It's because we discovered in Acts chapter 15, there's this party, this Jewish legalistic party, or saying, unless you're circumcised according to the laws of Moses, you cannot be saved. So in their day, they are saying circumcision is a symbol of salvation, that you are saved by your works, by going under the law. In other words, they are implying to this Gentile church, this non-Jewish church, trusting in Jesus is not enough. You need something more. So circumcision is this symbol of trusting in our own goodness and obedience to add to what Jesus did for us. It's a way of thinking,

I am contributing to my own salvation. That yes, there's Jesus, yes, he died on the cross, but I also need to do this and that and the other thing if I want to be in the family of God. Something that Paul absolutely denies and rejects throughout the letter. And the result of that way of thinking, Paul makes clear in these verses. So in verse 2, if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Jesus is either everything or he is nothing when it comes to our salvation. It's not Jesus does some of the work and then I top it up. It's all or nothing. And if we trust in circumcision and our own works, we make Jesus of no value. And again in verse 3, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he's required to obey the whole law. So if we put our trust in our own records of doing well, Paul is reminding us we can't pick and choose which things to obey.

We need to keep the whole law and not just by our standards. We need to keep it by God's perfect standard since God is holy and perfect and good. That's the only standard that he will accept.

And then you're back in that slavery of trying to reach a standard we can never reach. Verse 4, you who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ. If you hope to be justified, if you think that when you stand before God, you'll be declared righteous on the basis of your own efforts, then you're walking away from Jesus. You're out of line with the gospel of grace. You've fallen away from grace, as he puts it in verse 4. This is a serious thing that he's talking about. Paul is reminding us once again, grace and works, they're like oil and water. The two cannot mix. They are entirely separate and distinct. And he draws attention to that to remind us that true freedom is only found in Christ. It's only found when our faith is in Christ. Because when our faith is in Christ, to go back to verse 2, Christ is all of our value. Because we recognize that I can't do anything for my salvation, and I don't need to add anything to the perfect salvation that Jesus has secured for me freely at the cross. To go back to the language of verses 3 and 4, faith is freedom because it understands that Jesus has perfectly kept the law for me as my representative. That he has died in my place for my law-breaking. So my acceptance from God comes when I am in him, not when I'm trusting in myself.

[15 : 31] And then there's the faith language of verse 5. By faith, we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. That's so important there. By faith, we wait, not work. We're not trusting and grafting and making effort by ourselves. We're waiting, we're trusting in the work of another.

We're waiting for a righteousness that is gifted to us, not one that we earn. We have certain hope, not vague, wishful thinking, because the verdict has already been passed. We have this certain hope of an eternal welcome as a child of God, if we are in Christ, if our faith is in him. And then in verse 6, for in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. So true freedom is not an external thing.

It's not whether we keep a set of rules or rituals. It's about Jesus setting our hearts free to love and serve others. So we enjoy freedom through Jesus, not through the law.

As Paul's point here, as he defends gospel freedom, he reminds us it's all about faith in Jesus. Now, I was reminded about a story that I came across last week of a medical student from Ghana.

His name was Emmanuel. Now, Emmanuel from Ghana had been offered a scholarship to go and study medicine in a university in a university in Ghana, which is in South America.

[17 : 23] So Emmanuel bought himself a ticket, got on his plane, looking forward to this wonderful new opportunity that he was going to enjoy in Guyana, only to discover as he touched down that he'd actually bought a ticket for Guyana in Brazil. And he was 3,000 kilometers off course. Now, why do I tell you that? He had in his mind, my destination, it is over here, and it's going to give me all that I want.

And he got on the plane thinking it would take him there, but he was wildly off course. Galatians is reminding us there are two different routes that people think about when it comes to salvation. Paul's way, which is the way of gospel, it's the way of trusting in Jesus, but there's also the way of the law. There's the way of the gospel that says, I can't save myself, so I need to trust in Jesus completely. But then there's this other way of law which says, well, I can save myself, I can do something, so I don't need Jesus all that much at all. And we can come to this thing of salvation, we can have the destination of freedom in our mind. I really want to find true freedom, but it's only if we pick the right route that we're going to get there. It's only if we're trusting in Jesus. It's only if we're resting in God's grace that we will, as Jesus said, know the truth that will set us free. So true freedom comes when our faith is in Jesus and not in our law keeping.

And then he continues to defend the gospel in verses 7 to 10, and he starts talking about the message that we listen to, and it needs to be a message of Jesus saves and not save yourself.

So in verse 7, we're given a picture in verse 7, you were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? So the Christian life being like a race, we can picture it like a marathon. Now how do we join that race? Well, the Bible says we're called into that race by God the Father. We run the race trusting in Jesus from start to finish, and all the way along we're empowered. We get the help of the Holy Spirit to run, to reach the finish, to enjoy life with God. And so they'd begun the race well. They were running a good race, but then someone has cut them up. You know, we can think about a racetrack and there's lanes. Well, somebody has cut in on their lane so they can't run freely. And in fact, somebody has actually sent them off course. They found this obstacle in their way, and they're going off course. They're not following the way of gospel truth.

Again, it made me think of the Venice Marathon, which made the news last year. It made the news partly because it was won by an Italian for the first time in decades, but mostly it made the news because he should never have won the race at all. There was a group of leaders that were far ahead of him, and they were following. You know when you're watching a marathon, you see those motorbike riders up the front, and they're supposed to sort of clear a path, but also they're supposed to show the runners where the path the course actually is. Well, the motorbike guides had taken the front runners off course. So they'd gone 600 meters down some wrong streets. And after 600 meters, motorbike guy realized, turned them around back that 600 meters, by which point they'd been overtaken by a whole bunch of people.

[21 : 00] They trusted the guide, but the guide had led them off course. These Christians, they've wandered off. They've been diverted. They're not following the gospel of truth anymore.

They've gone off course because they're listening to a message that in effect says to them, you must do something to save yourself. Trusting in Jesus is not enough.

And this is a dangerous, dangerous diversion. So Paul wants to call that to their attention. So in verse 8, he says to them, that kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. Who called them? God called them. So he's saying to them, this message you're listening to is not God's message. God doesn't switch his message. He doesn't say, well, you come into God's family by trusting in God's grace alone. And he doesn't say halfway along, well, now you need to make sure you stay in the family by your law keeping. He doesn't switch from saved by grace to live by the law. It's one consistent message of grace. So they've stopped listening to God. Verse 9, there's a well-known phrase from Paul's day, a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. So this false message is now infecting more and more people in the church. It's spreading like a virus. But yet in spite of the danger and in spite of the warning, we see in verse 10 that Paul is still confident. How can he be confident? Or rather, who is he confident in? He's not confident in the Galatians in and of themselves. He says,

I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. He's trusting in God's powerful grace. He's trusting that God had in verse 8 called them by grace. So he calls them brothers throughout the letter. And he trusts that as true believers who've been called by God, they will again come to rely on grace. Yes, they've hit this obstacle. They're beginning to listen to save yourself. But Paul is confident that they will see the error of their ways. And because they're true Christians, they will rely on grace. But the question then remains, why did they ever switch from Paul's message? Why did they switch from this message, this Jesus saves message? And it seems like, again, it's down to these false teachers. So look with me at verse 11 and let's follow the logic here.

Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished.

[23 : 58] So it seems like these false teachers are going around saying, listen, that person Paul that you were listening to, he teaches circumcision. Paul is going around saying, trust in Jesus, but also become Jewish and to the work of Jesus to be saved. And Paul rejects this as a complete falsehood, as fake news, as we would call it today. And the logic that he gives is this. He's saying, well, if I was still preaching circumcision, if I was saying to people, look, you have it within yourself to save yourself, that's a message people would like to hear. They wouldn't persecute me if I was saying, basically, you're a good person, try a bit harder, and God will accept you. People like that kind of message.

No, Paul is being persecuted because he's preaching, Jesus saves, and only Jesus saves. Paul is being persecuted because of the offense of the cross that he preaches. Therefore, he is persecuted. Now, why is the message of the cross offensive? Why does it lead to persecution in Paul's day? Well, because the message of the cross says to everybody that we are weak, that we are sinful, and that we need someone from outside of ourselves to come and rescue him. And that's a very different message from the message of self-improvement that would say, do better, try harder, add some religion, and God will be pleased with you. It says we are spiritually dead. We are spiritually unable to do anything for us, for ourselves. And so there is offense because we must recognize in the cross that says you need Jesus as Savior, that Jesus is God's Savior. He is the only way to God.

And that's offensive to pride. That's offensive to modern notions of tolerance and ideas that all roads lead to God. It's offensive to, again, a self-help kind of religion.

And the message of the cross is offensive because it says here is a gift you must humbly receive by faith.

It means that you must turn away from sin. You must repent and turn to put your faith in Jesus as Savior, rather than what we would all like to hear by nature, which is work hard, try really hard, do better than others, and God will welcome you because you've earned a reward.

[26 : 49] But Paul says that's not the way it works. It's about grace and gift, not earning a reward. And this is what makes Christianity unique among every religion and worldview, because it's all about grace. It doesn't say to us you need to become a better person. You don't need to go on pilgrimage.

You don't need to do this and that. The next thing, we need to trust in what Jesus has done for us. We need to trust that not that we can bring ourselves up to God, but that God in His grace has come down to us in Jesus to rescue us from this spiritual slavery leading to death.

Christianity is unique in being totally realistic about what we're like as people, being realistic about sin and being realistic about the holiness of God, acknowledging that since God is holy and perfect and cannot stand sin, that by ourselves, the barrier between us and God is too great. The gulf is too wide because we are by nature sinful. And unless God deals with that sin, we cannot know and enjoy relationship with God. Christianity tells us how God in His grace has acted to deal with that barrier, that separation, so that we might become friends of God. Therefore, it offers hope and freedom to anyone. The wonderful thing about Christianity is it's so open. Yes, there's that exclusive message, you must trust in Jesus alone, but it's open to anybody, regardless of culture or background or anything else, if we will trust in Jesus. So he spends some time defending gospel freedom. And then finally and briefly, let's look at verses 13 to 15 as he begins to define what gospel freedom looks like. What does it look like for us when we have true freedom in the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, according to Paul, it's certainly not, well, now Jesus has set you free. You're free to do whatever you want. You're free to enjoy life without any limits at all. Rather, we discover that the gospel sets good limits and boundaries for us. Living within God's design, living within God's limits is good for us. There is freedom because we know the boundaries, we know life as God intended it to be. So what does this true freedom look like? There's three aspects to it.

First of all, in verse 13, we see how it relates to ourselves as individuals, and the emphasis is on self-control. So verse 13, you, my brothers, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature. So very clearly, we're called to self-control, not to do whatever, not to live however we want, not Jesus has saved me, so now I can live in sin, because Jesus will cover that. No, Jesus has acted to bring us out of enemy territory so that we might live a new way, that he gives us the spirit, he gives us a new heart, new desires, and a new identity as children of God, so that we have freedom to live more like him, to become more and more like Jesus. That's true freedom, to be self-controlled, to be able to do battle against sin, to be able to actually say, no, I don't want to do that sin,

I want to live for God, I want to be obedient to him. And so freedom involves self-control, saying no to the sinful nature, so we can say yes to true righteousness, to living for the glory of God, to be more like Jesus. Freedom as it relates to others, Paul says, is about loving service.

[31 : 13] So again, in verse 13, do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love. And then in verse 15, he says, if you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you'll be destroyed by each other. So it seems like within the church, as they've moved away from grace, they're beginning to fight and criticize and oppose. Things are turning ugly. It's not you before me, it's me before you. I come first. My priorities, my rights. Paul is saying that's not what gospel freedom looks like. When Jesus sets us free, he sets us free so we can love others, so we can serve others. And we can do that because in the gospel, we find this fundamental security.

I know my identity. I am a child of God. I am loved, valued, welcomed, approved by him. Therefore, I don't need to be fighting for position. I can make myself low to raise others up high because I know God loves me. When we think it's about our abilities and us doing well, we will always tend to compete and compare and there'll be fighting and devouring. But gospel freedom means that we are free to give ourselves gladly to serve others. And then what does gospel freedom look like in relation to God?

And this one is perhaps surprising given all that Paul has said in Galatians. Verse 14, what does he go back to? He goes back to the law. The entire law is summed up in a single command, love your neighbor as yourself. So gospel freedom as it relates to God means we have freedom to obey. So we need to think about this. So he's been saying to people, you don't try and keep the law in order to earn God's favor. You don't keep the law so you might get into God's family. But he is saying you do keep the law when you're in God's family in order to express your gratitude because you want to share your father's family values. We don't do it so we'll get into the family. We do it because we're in the family to say thank you to God, to express love and worship for him. And that's important and he's going to say more about that next week. So as Christians our relation to the law is we don't keep it in order to be in

God's family but we do keep it because we're children who want to honor and love our father in heaven. So Paul says to us as Christians that we have true freedom. We're free to live as we want because when we're in Christ, when we're transformed by grace, our great desire will be to want to live for him.

That's true freedom. So what he says to us, he says live in light of our gospel freedom.