

The Good News of Real Freedom

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Date: 11 January 2026

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[0 : 00] Please have a seat, and perhaps you could turn with me in your Bible to Galatians. I want to look at passages from chapters 2 and 3, page 1169.

! We've been thinking about the good news that we must never forget, this good news that comes from God, this good news that we are justified, not by our own record of righteousness, but by faith in the Lord Jesus.

This week we're thinking about how vital this message is, thinking about the vital news of real freedom in the good news of Jesus.

It's recognized, certainly in the Western world, that freedom is one of those basic human rights. I'll take you back to the summer of 2020, in the months following the killing of George Floyd.

I remember the worldwide anti-racism protests. And down in Bristol, down in the southeast of England, there was this famous scene where the statue of a chap by the name of Edward Colston, you can see it there, was toppled into the sea.

[1 : 17] In 1721, the statue was erected with the inscription, you know, Edward Colston, great benefactor of the city of Bristol. So, fast forward 300 years, and he's become the great villain.

And the question is, why the change? Why was the statue toppled? Well, the statue was toppled because he was somebody who had made his wealth through the trading of black slaves.

And that was seen as beyond the pale. And so, he was toppled. Today, we recognize freedom is a basic human right. Many of us are perhaps familiar with how the U.S. Declaration of Independence begins, 1776.

We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.

That among these are life, liberty, there's the freedom word, and the pursuit of happiness. Now, we take it as self-evident today.

[2 : 28] But sociologists recognize, if you look back through history, since the earliest times, all known societies were actually slave societies. So, what brought the change that means we think that freedom is something that's so essential and vital?

Why do we say, you know, any kind of slavery is wrong and should be toppled? And it's really interesting to see that Christians and atheists both recognize that within Western society, it's the Christian worldview that accounts for that.

We come to the book of Galatians, written in the mid-40s A.D. And we didn't hear this verse, but let me read it. Chapter 5, verse 1.

Here's a great statement from Paul as he writes this letter. 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.

So, Paul writes this letter with this great cry of freedom that is a particular kind of slavery that Paul the Apostle wants to topple. And it's the slavery of legalism.

[3 : 40] It's the slavery of the idea that we need faith in Jesus plus our own good works if we are to be right with God. And Paul says, down with that, that's false thinking.

And what he defends and what he celebrates and what he says is vital is that there is freedom in Christ. So, we're going to take two key verses in his letter.

We read them both, Galatians 2.20 and Galatians 3.28. We're going to explore two different aspects of God's gospel freedom.

And we're going to see how these themes connect with both the desires within our own hearts for freedom, but also how it creates the path towards the kind of world and society and community that we're looking for.

So, the good news that we must never forget is that faith in Jesus brings us real freedom. That we are no longer slaves. We're not slaves to performance, and we're not slaves to lines of division. [4 : 44] So, let's think about this idea, first of all, this freedom that comes through faith, this freedom that says we are not slaves to performance.

Some of you may be familiar with the Korean philosopher who now works in Germany called Byung Chul Han. He wrote a little book that's become really popular called *The Burnout Society*. And in that little book, he argues that modern life is creating anxieties and depressions. He uses the image of being consumed by work.

We are never able to switch off. There is the pressure of competition to find work or within a workplace. We want more stuff.

And so, we recognize to get more stuff, we need to earn more money so we work harder and we work longer. And there's a consumption because of work. And then you add the message of our culture, which from a very early age says to us, you can define and redefine yourself.

[5 : 53] You can be and do anything you want. And that sounds wonderful until we recognize the kind of pressure that puts on people. And what if you can't?

What if you can't reach that standard? What if you feel that you're stuck? And then we come to life today in the digital world and we watch stories and there are reels and there are videos.

And we feel, again, a pressure, perhaps subliminal, sometimes more overt, to be more adventurous, more beautiful, more witty and wise, more creative. And so many people in our society, and that includes us as Christians, are discovering, if I have to justify myself, if I have to prove myself, that's exhausting.

There's no peace in that way of life. There's no security in that way of life. There's no joy to be found there. And so as we begin, I wonder, do you recognize something of yourself in that?

Have you or are you trapped on the treadmill of performance? Remember Galatians chapter 5, verse 1.

[7 : 10] It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. The church in Galatia needed to hear this message of freedom from a particular kind of performance.

So if you weren't here last week, just to very briefly remind you of the situation, we have Paul the apostle writing this letter in great grief. He's defending the true gospel against a false message that the church is being pulled towards.

There's a group of false teachers. They're legalistic. They're saying you need to add law keeping to faith in Jesus if you want to be justified. If you really want to be a member of God's church, you need to prove yourself by your moral performance.

And this toxic teaching has spread through the church. So even Peter the apostle has come under its spell. He's become guilty in chapter 2, verse 11, onwards of hypocrisy.

So he knows. Acts chapter 10, if you read your McShane Bible reading plan, you'll have read Acts chapter 10. Peter has come to discover God shows no favoritism.

[8 : 19] He knows the gospel. Jesus is all you need for salvation, but his actions in a particular moment are denying those truths. Because he says, unless you keep a diet like the Jews, I'm not going to share fellowship and hospitality with you.

And so Paul speaks and acts and writes in this kind of context because he understands that any view of religion and any worldview that says you and I need to perform to be saved and to be accepted, it cannot offer real hope.

It cuts us off from Jesus and it severs us from real joy. Because if it is in any way about me or about you, how good is good enough?

What is the standard that we apply? What happens to my salvation if I have a bad day or a really spectacular fail? And one of the reasons that Paul writes this letter is to remind the church in every generation that if we want to apply God's law to our lives and say, this is the standard, and if I can just keep this standard, then God will be pleased with me.

We need to take that really, really seriously. Because unlike our school or uni exams, God doesn't grade on a curve. He doesn't say, well, 70%, that satisfies for a top-level mark.

[9 : 59] Or if the exam is particularly difficult, let me lower the bar. God doesn't do that with his law. In fact, what the Bible says is that if we fail at even one point in law obedience, then the whole law is broken.

If we don't love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, with all of our energy all of the time, then the law is broken and we are guilty.

If we don't love our neighbor with the same energy and creativity and love that we apply to ourselves, then we are guilty of breaking the law.

And remember who our God is. God is holy. He is perfect and he is just. And so he will not accept our excuses. Circumstances made me.

And he will not and he cannot sweep sin under the rug. So if we try and make the basis of our salvation our performance, we will always find ourselves failing.

[11 : 09] Over the holidays, we watched David Attenborough's Wild London show. I don't know if any of you saw it. It's a really lovely show. David Attenborough loves the city that he grew up in.

And there's this really nice scene with the hedgehogs. We love hedgehogs. They're very cute. Hedgehogs are blind, almost blind.

And so there was this scene of this one hedgehog desperately trying to get to the food that it needed and trying to find its way to a mate. But in London, as in all places, when you have gardens, you have fences and you have walls.

And so this poor, blind hedgehog was trying to get to where it needed to go, but was literally bashing its head against a garden fence. No access and no hope, except that the kind people of London have been creating hedgehog highways, cutting out little holes at the bottom of their garden fences so that hedgehogs can move from one garden to the other and find the lady hedgehog and the food that they need.

And all is well that ends well. Why am I telling you a story about hedgehogs? Because the Bible would say to us that you and I, by nature, are exactly like that blind hedgehog.

[12 : 34] And that when we try to perform to enter the kingdom of God, to find life with God, we will come to recognize that we are spiritually blind, we are bashing our heads against the wall of God's law and our broken sin.

And what we need is someone to open the way for us. And that's where the gospel comes in. Because the gospel that Paul is talking about says, listen, stop looking at your own performance. The only performance that matters is the perfect performance of the Lord Jesus in His life, in His death, and His resurrection. And the Lord Jesus, by His grace, has created a heavenly highway for us, a way back to God, the means by which you and I, simply by faith in Jesus, are declared righteous, just and accepted by God through faith in Him.

And on that basis, faith saves us, and faith is also how we live the Christian life.

And that's exactly the point that Paul makes at the end of chapter 2. Galatians chapter 2, verse 20. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

[13 : 59] The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

This is the key to living the Christian life. Freedom comes when we are in Jesus Christ. When we understand that He has died for us, that He has loved us and given Himself for us, and that now by faith, He lives in us.

In fact, He is our life. Here's where the freedom of faith comes. By faith, we share in what happened to Jesus.

So just as Jesus died on the cross, so we die to the law as the way to get right with God. And we die to sin because the power and penalty of sin has been broken in our lives.

And we now die to self so we can live to Christ. We have a new identity. We die to that idea of legalism. I need to perform if I'm going to belong to God.

[15 : 09] And by faith, we get the security we look for. We are secure in Christ. Martin Luther put it this way, by faith, you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are one person which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever.

That's the gospel that gives us security. Whatever is true of Jesus is true of us. Wherever Jesus has gone, so we follow.

And by faith, Paul says to us, we have a new source for living our lives. We're not relying on our own strength. Rather, we rely on Christ in us.

And so the Christian and the Christian church, we sing, Christ is our life. He is my strength. He is my peace. He is my source of love and joy.

He is my holiness. He is my hope. So that to be justified by faith in Jesus is to be set free from slavery to the performance mindset.

[16:27] It's to have freedom to rest and trust in Christ alone for our salvation. We are a burnout society. And some of you have been there.

How can you and I avoid spiritual burnout? Only as we leave behind that idea of performing to be accepted.

Only as we believe and trust in the gospel that says it's through faith in Jesus Christ alone, by God's grace alone, that I'm saved.

Perhaps it might be helpful at the start of the year to perform a spiritual health check. How would you honestly answer these questions?

Do you think God accepts you only if you are good enough? Do you believe that God loves you more if you have a good day spiritually?

[17:36] Do you find it difficult to admit sin and failure to God and to others? There are many more questions that we could ask, but we need to understand that the temptation towards legalism is real.

It happened to Peter. It happened to that church in Galatia. And you and I, we need to always be coming back to this good news that we're justified by faith alone, to believe that gospel, to preach that gospel to ourselves, and to live by faith in Jesus each day.

This evening, we're thinking about the secure identity that we have as a child of God. That's the answer. So we have freedom through faith, so we're no longer slaves to performance.

But secondly, because we have freedom in Christ, we are no longer slaves to dividing lines that we see so often in our society.

If we go back to the protest movements that we've been seeing in the last few years, what message does that tell us about the society in which we live? Think about the Black Lives Matter movement.

[18:51] What does that say to us? It says to us, sadly, tragically, racism is real. What did the Me Too movement remind us of over and over?

Violence against women is real. What did the protests that we see outside G8 summits or in front of big business say to us? The inequality of rich and poor is real.

Our society often seems better at building walls than we are at building bridges. whether that's in person or digitally.

That rise in tribalism, in hate, we focus on what divides us more than what brings us together. And it's really interesting that the first century world actually was not so different.

When we turn to Galatians chapter three and those end verses, Paul identifies the big three forms of division and prejudice in his day. Hear what he says in chapter three verse 28.

[20:02] There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. One of the most amazing things about the story of the early church in the first few centuries is the way that they tore down those barriers in the Roman world.

That this message of freedom in Christ had explosive power. So here, for the very first time, it seemed like, women found honor and protection and they flocked to the church.

Slaves that were dispossessed, they could become leaders and they could worship with their masters and so they loved the message of the gospel and the culture gap was bridged.

that Jew and Gentile who normally hated each other would gather together to worship in one house in one church. And it was amazing and as people saw this radically different community, they were drawn to ask, what is it that makes this place, this people, this message so different and so wonderful?

And that helps us to remember why the letter to the Galatians is so important because this was under threat. The church was wrestling with this message.

[21:18] What is the basis for belonging to God's church? Is God's grace powerful enough to unite those who are normally divided? Can a multi-ethnic church of rich and poor of male and female, can it really flourish?

Can it show the beauty of the gospel? And Paul's answer through this letter and it's the message of the whole Bible is that yes, it can flourish and indeed it must.

This is God's design for His church. But it's not easy and that's what we see in Galatia. If God's design for His church were to be sort of captured in an artwork in a canvas, it wouldn't be the canvas of geometric shapes, of nice, clear, crisp lines of everything black and white.

Perhaps it would be more like, I'm no art critic, but you know when you go into a gallery, perhaps a modern art gallery, and you see those paintings and you think, a five-year-old could have done that. You know when you just get that sort of mess of color and swirl and it all kind of blends in together and it's messy but you're kind of drawn to it, that's the church by God's design.

[22 : 38] It is messy to figure out how these people can come together but there's something beautiful in this kind of community. And Paul, here in chapter 3 verses 26 to 29 shows how the gospel has the power to create this new community.

Verse 26, so in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. All believers are part of God's family.

One father would become brothers and sisters. That's a unifying principle. Verse 27, all believers have a new identification.

For all of you who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. So all of these Gentiles who are becoming Christians for the first time, they're getting baptized and they're doing that as a public statement.

I now identify with Jesus as Lord. I'm not going to worship Caesar and the gods of Rome. I identify with Jesus as Lord. And then Paul uses this imagery of being clothed with Christ.

[23 : 47] And that's an interesting image when in that day when you moved from childhood to adulthood, you literally put on a new set of clothes to show this new identification.

new identification. And the new identification for the Christian, what do we clothe ourselves with? With Christ himself. He's the new clothes we put on.

Verse 28, all believers have a new identity. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

What is the badge that identifies you, that identifies me? When we introduce ourselves, we probably have a whole list of characteristics and other people will view us through certain lenses, but what Paul wants to say in the gospel, the badge that identifies us as a Christian is, I am in Christ.

That's what comes first. That's what should define us. Now he's not saying that all of those things cease to exist, our gender or our nationality or our social status.

[25 : 03] He doesn't say that we should all become exactly the same. He's not saying the church should look uniform, but what he is saying is that unity in Jesus, that's what matters.

That's how we should see each other. Not nationality, not money, not gender. Of course, those things matter, but they're not primary. And then in verse 29, he reminds us that all believers have a new inheritance.

If you belong to Christ, then you're Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. So he goes back to Abraham. To be in Christ Jesus, to have faith in Jesus, means we get all of God's blessings, all that he has promised in the present, but also thinking about future inheritance, future glory, life with God that lasts forever.

That's true for all who will believe. And so as Paul writes to this church that's wrestling, and as we find ourselves in the 21st century in a society wrestling with these walls that divide, he introduces us to the power of the true gospel that can create a gospel community that builds bridges and doesn't build walls.

And so he paints this beautiful canvas of a community that is free of pride, that is free of prejudice, that is free of hostility and hate.

[26 : 41] He calls them back to the gospel so that the church would be a place where anyone can find members, where anyone can find a welcome and hospitality, where acceptance and grace is given and received.

That's what the gospel can do. It's only what the gospel can do. Doesn't that sound good? Doesn't that sound like a good vision from God for a local church, for a church like ours? Doesn't that sound like a good place to invite people into, people who are hurting, people who are lonely, people who need hope?

Now, of course, we need to be honest. Christianity has not always practiced what it should preach. Of course, you can look at church history and you can look in our own day and we recognize Christians and churches have been guilty of ugly racism and prejudice and we have to own that. But it is also true that Christians have been responsible for wonderful acts that have brought unity, that have brought love, that has brought separate people together.

