

True Freedom

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Our Heavenly Father, our hearts are cold and weak, and we pray as we turn to your word that you would warm us and strengthen us.

We ask that you would give us the capacity to understand something of the freedom that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ, for we ask in his name. Amen. Please sit down.

Galatians chapter 5 on page 179. We've been working through this book and we come now to chapter 5 where the Apostle says, For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand fast therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

Now I'm not sure freedom is the first word that comes to people's minds when they think of Christians. I think if we had Angus Reid go into a poll on the street and ask people what impression they had of us, I'm guessing that the words they would come up with are words like, A little stuffy, uptight and careful, and probably way down on the list would come the word free.

I might be wrong about that. This week I heard of a young man who decided to abandon his Christian faith, and a few weeks afterwards he told his friends it was a great experience of freedom.

[1 : 40] He felt he was throwing off chains that held him in guilt. Now here we are in the letter of Paul to the Galatians, and after one of, I think you'll agree, one of the deepest explorations of the Christian gospel, the Apostle Paul summarizes what being a Christian is all about, and he says it is being set free.

It's being liberated. It is being released. More than that, he says, it's not just being set free from something, but what it is we are set free for is freedom.

For freedom, Christ has set us free. And I think this is wonderfully important for us today, because, I don't know whether you'll agree with this or not, but I think our fundamental understanding of freedom has been shifting, particularly in the last 20 to 30 years.

Traditionally, freedom was a political concept where we desired the absence of bondage and civility for a certain kind of independence that would be limited by the public good.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms includes freedoms such as the freedom of conscience and religion and thought, belief, opinion and expression, the freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.

[3 : 06] And I think that is shifting today. And the way it shifts is that we live in a culture which has elevated personal choice to being an unquestioned idol.

And along with that, freedom has become deeply personal. Because in a consumer culture, it is my right to enjoy unlimited and unbridled choice in every area of my life.

And any boundary and any restriction and any limitation is an evil. So everything in life can now be reduced to options, which is why I think we are so affronted when we are faced with circumstances that remind us of our limitations, like growing old or dying.

And the Christian gospel comes to us and points us to a man who came from heaven, who is nailed to a tree, inescapably nailed to a tree, dying in agony, through no fault of his own, out of complete grace and love.

And it says that true freedom is very different than the kind of freedom that we pursue day by day. That what we think is freedom is actually a cruel and lifelong slavery.

[4 : 32] And what looks to so many as if it's really slavery is actually freedom. Paul says here that becoming a Christian is being liberated in the most profound and radical and permanent way because the freedom comes from outside our world, from God, and lasts into eternity.

And the disturbing thing, the disturbing message of the book of Galatians is this, that even after we begin to experience this freedom and after we begin to follow Jesus Christ, it's very easy to fall back into spiritual slavery.

And we don't fall back into spiritual slavery so much by sins of the flesh and indulgence, but by mixing Jesus Christ with a little bit of morality and a little bit of religious observance. We try and add to what Jesus has done. This week, the newspapers have been full of stories of the Christian peacemakers team members who were kidnapped in Iraq and were rescued by a remarkable military operation.

One of the articles had as its headline Adjusting to Freedom Difficult. And it's the story of, is his name Lonnie, one of the freed prisoners? And he spoke about how difficult it is to leave captivity. [6:01] You want to leave behind all the fears and all the difficulties and live openly again, but he says that even the simplest things are almost impossible to do. Now, of course, nobody has made the ridiculous suggestion that one way around the problem for Mr. Lonnie might be to step back into captivity again, to give himself up and to leave his freedom behind.

And I know it sounds a little bit bizarre, but this is exactly what the false teachers in Galatians were suggesting to the Galatians Christians. They didn't put it that way, of course.

And when the temptation comes to us to live this way, it never comes openly announcing, leave your freedom, come back into slavery. But the book of Galatians is a brilliant reminder to us that there are two competing processes at work in every single one of us.

One of them is making us free and the other wants to make us slaves again. That is why in the first verse the Apostle gives two commands. He says, stand fast in your freedom and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

And I just want to look at this passage under these two headings, making free and making slaves. First the good news and then the bad news. Firstly, then making free.

[7:26] Now what does Paul mean? I mean, what does he mean by saying that we are free in Christ? Is this just empty talk?

What exactly is this freedom that Christ brings us through his death? And at the heart of the passage, verses 5 and 6, he explains what it is. Let me read those verses for you.

For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.

The book of Galatians is about justification by faith. But justification is a future event which is made present in our lives now by faith.

Justification is the verdict of God on the last day. It is on the judgment day when we appear before him. He looks at us and he says, this is my child.

[8:34] There is no record of any sin here. She is clothed in the righteousness of my son. He is innocent and pure and beautiful before me.

You are justified. And the greatest test about whether we have begun to understand this is whether we eagerly hope for that righteousness and that verdict at the last day.

And I don't think that is an easy thing to do. If you are anything like me, I look at my own life and I see failure and sin and lost opportunities. As we work through the early part of the service this morning and I hear the law read that I am to love God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength and my neighbour as myself, I don't know about you but I feel I have not done very well at that this week.

And to say I look forward to that day when I will stand before him can only be said based on the justifying death of Jesus for me. Do you see, both false teachers and the apostle in Galatia agreed that we become Christians by justification.

The problem comes after justification because we are sinful people and we sin every day and if you don't think you sin every day come and talk to me.

[10:00] Our consciences condemn us and they have much to condemn us for. Satan accuses us and he has much to accuse us for. But here is the thing, the certain way back into slavery is what Paul calls the way of circumcision which is the way of religious obligation which is beginning to look not at the death of Jesus but to look at my moral achievement or my moral or my religious sincerity or to look at anything that is in me.

You see, in the cross of Jesus Christ God gives us a freedom which is from outside this world that stretches from eternity to eternity. It comes directly from him.

And this freedom is being able to look at our own lives and look at God and to say I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live it's Christ who lives in me.

And it is freedom friends because it begins a process of transformation inside us. It's completely different to moral reformation.

It is being redeemed. It's not being improved. It's true freedom. God does not set me free from my bad record to begin trying to build a better one.

[11 : 21] For freedom Christ has set me free. I find it hard to describe. See, here is the purest form of freedom that I am absolutely and completely righteous before God and so are you through faith in Christ.

It is not the level of my surrender. It is not the strength of my faith. Thank goodness. It's not the number of my prayers. It's not the length of my obedience.

It's not the level of my purity nor the depth of my repentance but it is Christ and Christ alone who loved me and gave himself for me. So you see when I do something good on those occasions when I do something good it doesn't change God's love for me.

He does not accept me any more if I've had a good week and if I fail him it does not change his love for me. He doesn't love me any less than he did before because through the spirit by faith we wait for the hope of righteousness.

We do not obey because he will accept us more but because he will never leave us and forsake us. See it's possible to start out by faith to experience the grace of God and then suddenly to want to go back to the law to begin thinking that God is in my debt I deserve what he gives me and we begin to think about what we might have given up and we begin to compare ourselves horizontally with others and resent what God is giving others.

[12 : 57] In yesterday's National Post the editorials spoke about the ingratitude of the Christian peacemaker team members who were rescued in Iraq and the editor's final paragraph said this here's a suggestion the next time peaceniks are taken hostage in a war zone while attempting to thwart the efforts of western coalition forces when those same forces come to save them and before the helicopters lift off to safety with the hostages aboard the soldiers should ask the former detainees how they feel about being saved and if there's a moment's hesitation for philosophic reflection or a hint of ingratitude the soldiers should be free to return the passengers to the desert with all good wishes for fair treatment by the first jihadis who pass by interesting paragraph isn't it you see Jesus did not owe it to us to die on the cross for us he didn't deserve to die but he determines to go to the cross out of the freedom of his own grace and the man nailed on the cross offering himself for us is the freest action this world has ever seen that's why Paul says verse 6 in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any relevance really but only faith expressing itself through love faith will express itself through love we are justified by faith alone but if faith is real it's never alone genuine faith is always accompanied by love we're going to look at this next week when we move on from verse 13 and here is the thing for the Galatians the false teachers were saying after you've been justified you've got to make sure you're accepted before God through your religious observance and Paul says it is the cross of Jesus Christ that brings us in it is the cross of Jesus Christ that keeps us on the track and it's the cross of Jesus Christ that will bring us to heaven in the end it's all Christ and our freedom comes from the fact that we are justified the hope of righteousness how can the Holy Spirit live in you and live in me with all the sin in our lives it can only be because we are justified how can we pray how can we sing how can we live for it's only because we've been justified this is the gospel work of freedom in us and Paul says stand fast in that freedom don't let it go secondly and much more briefly making slaves let's look at how slavery happens again for us in verse 2 Paul says now I Paul say to you that if you receive circumcision Christ will be of no advantage to you I testify to every man and woman who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law you are severed from Christ you who would be justified by the law you have fallen away from grace now four times he mentions circumcision here it's the historic Jewish sign of the covenant it has an impeccable religious pedigree and Paul says in the starkest possible terms that if they go ahead and receive circumcision because they had come from pagan background Christ will be no value to them they'll be severed from Christ they'll have fallen away from grace and you may

think that's a bit strange particularly in the light of the fact that the apostle Paul took Timothy and had him circumcised when he joined the mission team but the reason is very simple because the teachers the new teachers were saying that the death of Jesus while it's enough to get us in it's not enough to help us grow and continue and they were insisting on an impeccably fine religious way to help Jesus along and this is very important for us you see because false teaching in the church very

rarely denies that jesus is the son of god or that he died on the cross it's just that we would be safer with god if we added something if we added some religious practice or some virtue to what jesus has done the constant temptation of my heart and your heart the constant danger throughout church history has been to try and complete what jesus has done to begin to operate as though we've got something to add to the ministry of jesus on the cross and what we do is we take perfectly good things in themselves and we begin to insist that my effectiveness or my usefulness or my growth as a christian depends not on christ but on something else in addition to christ everyone who receives circumcision is bound to keep the whole law says paul i think that is quite devastating why is paul making such a fuss i mean all the teaching of the bible becomes now focused on this one absurd trivial religious right and in every age you know there have been teachers in the church who have said it's just a very small thing really why make such a fuss if you had been on the church council in galatia in one of the churches and there had been teachers who had come along and said we must be circumcised i wonder what we would have done i mean we probably would have welcomed it as an expression of an alternate understanding of christian spirituality and it's not going to hurt anyone else is it and what's really at stake as some years ago when i was working in australia there was a sect that began to work amongst our young people they call themselves the church of christ it's not the christian denomination called the church of christ and they taught that you couldn't be saved unless you were fully baptized by one of their official leaders they aggressively proselytized and we lost a number of young people to them it is brothers and sisters a gospel plus it's jesus plus you've got to be baptized by us and paul says very simply if you add something to jesus jesus vanishes christ plus circumcision christ plus anything leaves you with nothing if you add circumcision to christ you're seeking to complete the work of jesus on the cross you cannot have jesus do half the work for of saving us either he does all the work of saving us or he does none at all and you see the way it works in verse nine paul says a little leaven leavens the whole lump i've only made bread twice both in canada times in canada first time i did not give the yeast long enough to rise and the loaf came the loaf came out of the oven it looked fantastic and it had roughly the constituency of a house brick so i made a new lot and i put a lot of yeast in it and i let it rise overnight and in the morning there was this huge growing mutant in the kitchen burst out of the box that i had it in now it's exactly the same with false teaching here is satan's strategy he very rarely goes for a full frontal assault on the gospel but what he does he just adds to it he adds something very fine to it and the yeast spreads through every part it's very interesting here that the way he does it is through individual teachers individual men and women you see in verse 10 paul mentions one individual he says i have confidence in the lord that you will take no other view than mine and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment whoever he is i mean until now the teachers have been a group of teachers but this gospel plus never enters the church in some abstract doesn't just float in it always comes through individuals and this individual is clearly an eminent person who is teaching the gospel plus paul says it doesn't really matter if he is an angel from heaven if he teaches a different gospel whoever he is god will judge him and you may think after all that we've said from galatians that the gospel plus is such a silly thing why is it so tempting and the answer i think is there in verse 11 the reason is simply because it neutralizes the scandal of the gospel because the christian gospel begins by offending us if you've never been offended by the cross of jesus christ you cannot have understood it because the cross of jesus comes to us and it says you are so far from god it required his son to be slaughtered for you you're so lost you're so weak you're so rebellious that nothing less than the death of his son is enough to free us whereas the gospel plus comes along with a much more affirming message it wants to play down the negatives it says you're not so radically lost really that there are things you can do visible and physical things that you must do to show your sincerity to secure your salvation is it not the role of religion to make you morally responsible and yes as we see next week the new testament does call upon us to perform good works but it is our motivation which demonstrates our freedom or our slavery do i do them to assure myself of God's acceptance if i do that then loving other people becomes a way of manipulating you because i'm loving you so that i can build my account before God and the problem with that way of living it's a slavery because when something gets in the way of my loving you

I will become blocked and angry or frightened or depressed but when we act on the basis of the cross of Jesus Christ then I'm acting out of the fact that God has accepted me and he does love me and there's nothing I can do that can change that and that I'm free to love for the sake of love because it is only through Jesus Christ and it is only through the cross of Jesus Christ that we are

brought in it's only through the cross of Christ that we are grown up and it's only through the gospel of the cross of Christ that we are brought to heaven in the end for freedom Christ has set us free stand fast therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery amen