

Grace Given

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[0 : 00] Now, if you would take your Bible and open to Galatians chapter 2, the way in which the Holy Spirit will direct and rule our hearts, I trust, this morning, is as we look at this passage together.

It's on page 177, Galatians chapter 2. Before my last three grades in high school, I had to cross the Harbour Bridge at least twice a day.

In fact, to get to school, I had to catch a bus into the city and then a train from the city across the Harbour Bridge to where my school was.

But I'm sure you're not interested in my suffering at this stage. It was character building. Now, back on the city side of the Harbour Bridge was the residence of the Governor of New South Wales, and his son was in my grade.

And he did not take the bus or the train. He was driven to and from school in a government limousine. In fact, anything he wanted to do would be provided by the limousine service.

[1 : 02] And one day we were walking out of the gate of school at the end of school together. He asked me which way I travelled, and I told him, and he said, he insisted, in fact, that I join him in this limo.

And I put up a fairly good protest. I said, no, no, no. Yes, I said. And I joined him for the limo ride. But then, and for a number of other times after that.

And it was fantastic. I need to tell you, they don't make limos like they used to. This was a lounge on wheels. It was a lounge room on wheels with all sorts of gadgets and James Bond things here and there.

But as we sat in the car and drove across the Harbour Bridge, he began to tell me what life was like for the son of the Governor. And he said to me, all the privilege and all the freedoms I have have just made me miserable.

He said, it's, you know, riding in a limo by yourself is absolutely no fun whatsoever. In fact, the privileges and freedoms are very hard to enjoy on your own.

[2 : 05] And I thought of him this week as I read on Wednesday in the newspaper of the installation of Canada's new Governor-General. Now, everyone seems to have a strong opinion one way or other on Michelle Jean.

I read in the next day's post, on the one side, Andrew Coyne just gushed, and I quote, he said about her speech that it was a speech of heartbreaking sincerity and jaw-dropping boldness, uplifting without being Pollyanna-ish, tender yet tough-minded, vigorous, audacious, even bellicose in spots.

I think you'd say that about my sermons, wouldn't you? However, others are not convinced. And the editorial said that her speech was banal and strained, making gratuitous references to wealth inequality, with references that were out of date, out of place, even bordering on the absurd, which I thought was a little bit unkind, but that is what you say about my sermons, I know.

What captured people's attention was that she didn't dwell on tolerance and multilateralism and healthcare, but on freedom. She said that living life, her life, had been a lesson on learning to be free.

As a refugee from a ruthless dictatorship, she spoke about how precious her freedom is. And most striking to me is the photograph of her six-year-old daughter, mid-ceremony.

[3 : 32] It's plastered across the top of the page. Her six-year-old daughter has both her hands over both her ears with her eyes closed mid-ceremony. And I thought, it's a wonderful prophetic act.

I think she was blocking her ears because of the 21-gun salute, not during her mother's speech. But it did remind me of my friend from school.

And here in the midst of a great deal of talk about freedom is a very little person who all the talk about freedom and privilege is probably lost on. And that feels a little bit what it's like going through Galatians.

And the reason I tell you this is because the Bible teaches us that at the heart of the Christian experience is freedom. It's not a political freedom or an economic freedom.

It's not the freedom of personal rights and privileges. It's a freedom which is much deeper and much more important, which comes directly from God through the death of Jesus Christ into our hearts.

[4 : 37] It's freedom from everything that would separate us, everything that stands between us and God. Freedom from guilt, freedom from death, from condemnation, freedom from the approval of others, freedom for what we were made for.

And if you look down at chapter 2, verse 4, Paul the Apostle calls it our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus. And that is why he's writing this letter.

You see in verse 5, he says at the end of verse 5 that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And how wonderful it is that the gospel, the truth of the gospel has been preserved for us.

Because the only way in which the Lord Jesus Christ comes to us is clothed in this very gospel. And if you're with us for the first time, I should tell you, the Apostle Paul is writing this letter to a group of churches in Galatia.

They had come to hear this liberating news of the gospel through the Apostle Paul. They'd come to believe in Jesus Christ. And after Paul had left, some false teachers had come in and said to them, it's not enough.

[5 : 55] It's not enough to believe the gospel. You have to add ceremonial, you have to obey all the Old Testament law. You have to be circumcised unless, or you will not be saved. And Paul doesn't really know what he's talking about because he doesn't come from Jerusalem, which is like the headquarters of Christianity.

Christianity. And I think it almost goes without saying that Paul's enemies have lots of disciples today. This week, I had a conversation with an Anglican preacher here in Canada who said to me, well, he said, the Apostle Paul didn't write these letters and even if he did, we can't really take them all that seriously.

If you study theology, if you study theology at the university or at a seminary, there are very large books that are written that say Paul's gospel and Peter's gospel and Jesus' gospel are all different and contradictory.

That when Peter and Paul came along, they changed the gospel. They improved the original version, but they got it all wrong. Part of what Paul is saying here in Galatians is that's complete nonsense.

Nonsense. The style may be different, the accents may be different, but there's no contradiction because there's absolutely one gospel and while the other apostles received it from Jesus Christ, Paul received it later from the risen Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus.

[7 : 16] And I say that to you because the gospel is still very much the focus in this passage. Four times the apostle refers to it in these ten verses. But you see, it's much more than just wanting to bring us to some sort of intellectual agreement.

Yes, I agree with the gospel. And so what Paul does in these ten verses is he tells us that the gospel brings us two things that come from God and from God alone and two things which are essential to being Christian and I think being human.

And the first is, the gospel brings true freedom. Look down at 2, 1 to 3. He says, after 14 years, I went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas taking Titus.

I laid before them, privately, but before those who are of repute, the gospel that I was preaching, lest somehow I should be running or run in vain. But Titus was not compelled to be circumcised even though he was a Greek.

I want to come to Titus in just a moment. Paul has made it very clear in chapter 1, and if you just cast your eyes down to 1.12, the gospel that he is preaching, he received from God directly, by revelation, not through man, not according to man.

[8 : 33] In fact, when he received it, he was busy trying to exterminate the Christian church, which made him very non-receptive to the gospel. And when he received the gospel from heaven, he didn't go and check it out with the apostles.

He began preaching it immediately. He went for three years into Arabia, then he went up to Silesia in Syria, into Galatia, to preach God's beautiful gospel.

And now, 14 years later, in chapter 2, after preaching the gospel around about a half of the Roman Empire, he finally comes up to Jerusalem. Do you know why he went up? Because he was bringing money from Gentile churches to the Christians, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who were facing a famine.

It's a stunning reversal. He wasn't called up by the apostles to defend and explain his gospel, but he was coming up by the revelation of God, bringing financial aid from people who were not Jews, who had never heard about the love of God in Jesus Christ, even two years before.

It's a great, it's a lovely situation. He says, when I came up, I laid before them the gospel privately and humbly, not because I needed their sanction, but lest I was running in vain.

[9 : 57] He's not worried that, he's not worried that he's got the gospel all mixed up. The gospel does not need any human validation. You know, even if the world itself and every single person within it were to reject the gospel and say the gospel's wrong, wouldn't change the truth of the gospel or the power of the gospel one iota.

Paul's concern in verse 3 is that the false teachers have come to these Galatian Christians and are recapturing them and bringing them back into captivity from which they have been freed because Satan wants to do anything to stop the progress of the gospel in our lives and through our lives. And the way he does it is by tinkering with the gospel itself. This is how it works. He comes to us with the suggestion that our salvation could not possibly rest on a message that is so simple and so primitive.

I mean, are you not tempted to think that this original gospel is just a little bit out of date and embarrassing? We need to add pieces here and there to make it more plausible.

I mean, for example, take the message of the cross itself. The Apostle Paul says in the letter of Corinthians, the word of the cross, the preaching of the cross, is foolishness to those who are perishing.

[11 : 16] To us who are being saved, it is the power of God. That is a very divisive message. It says, the word of the cross divides humanity into two groups. One group regards the cross as foolishness, they are the ones who are perishing.

The others regard the cross as the power of God, they are being saved. And despite our attempts to create it, there is no middle ground between them. Either we are part of the group who are perishing or we are part of the group that is being saved.

And the point I'm making is that it all hinges on what you make of the cross. Because in the cross of Jesus, the only place where we are, we receive the complete and absolute approval and acceptance by God.

So that's why Titus is so important. He's a living, breathing example of the freedom of the gospel. He is an uncircumcised, Gentile, Christian man.

His demonstration, proof positive that circumcision and all the ceremonial law are a matter of complete indifference. See, what happens is this. We live our lives with a small circle of issues around us that we regard as very important and outside that are things that are not so important.

[12 : 30] And what the gospel does is it comes and it throws everything up in the air and many of those things that were very important to us suddenly we find are actually not that important in the long run and there's one thing that was out there on the edge that we didn't think was important that becomes the thing of fundamental and absolute importance to everything.

and that happens to us ongoingly not just the day you and I come to faith in Christ. The gospel continues to overturn our prejudices and our treasured opinions even after we've been Christians for many years because the gospel itself is the source of ongoing renewal and reform and revitalization.

It keeps coming to us and saying your fundamental allegiance is not to yourself and your own opinions but to the Lord Jesus Christ. Now have some sympathy with the preacher this morning. It's very difficult to get excited about this whole circumcision issue today isn't it? I mean I'm going to have to just explain this.

See in Judaism this was a very big deal. Generations of tradition and practice. This is the mark that God had given to Abraham as Eugene Peterson says performed on the most private member of your body to show it at the most intimate level of your life that you're separated for God and Paul knew exactly how important it was for the Jews.

[13 : 58] If you just keep your finger in Galatians 2 and turn left turn back to Acts 16 for just a moment. In Acts 16 verse 3 on page 128 around the same time Titus is brought into the mission team we meet another person called Timothy.

Verse 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in their place for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now you see what's going on Paul has Timothy circumcised but Titus he won't have circumcised which demonstrates of course that circumcision is neither here nor there.

The reason he has Timothy circumcised is because he doesn't want anyone to have any excuse to not listen to the preaching of the gospel and the reason he won't have Titus circumcised is because everyone says he must be circumcised to be saved.

But the gospel has freed us from every condemnation and from every rule. So we go back to chapter 2 in Galatians and we read in verse 4 because of false brethren secretly brought in who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus that they might bring us into bondage to them we did not yield submission even for a moment that the truth of the gospel may be preserved for you.

See these false brothers they're literally pseudo-believers they wanted to argue up and down about circumcision and Paul says it's not about any this law or that law it's not about circumcision or uncircumcision it is about the truth of the gospel and the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus and freedom and the truth of the gospel always go together.

[15 : 53] Now if what I'm saying is completely lost on you let me try and give let me put it in today's terms. In today's world there are two competing views of freedom.

One view says that freedom is the liberty from all the rules that God has established a freedom to explore my own desires and to do what I want and that freedom shows itself as I wrap myself in a bulletproof vest of personal rights and freedoms so that I will be endlessly free to explore every desire to the place where I choose.

My freedom comes to do what I want when I want how I want with whom I want I will define who I am. That's one view. The other view of freedom says this that the cross of Jesus Christ comes to our lives and says freedom true freedom does not come from anything that you do but from what God has done for you in Jesus Christ and that the way it shows itself a life lived by someone who lives under the cross of Jesus Christ is someone who takes up their cross daily denies themselves and follows Jesus.

The freedom is lived out as we give our lives away not holding our lives and coddling our lives to ourselves losing our lives in service of others rather than trying to find my own path.

It's saying I'm not going to define myself by my choices I'm defined by what happened that day in the death of Jesus Christ. See that kind of freedom can only come from one place it can only come from the cross of Jesus Christ because in the death of Jesus God accepts us utterly completely and eternally.

[17 : 39] Yesterday we had a capacity crowd at the men's breakfast and Brian McConachie spoke to us a little bit about the very moving and dangerous work of the RCMP in Cambodia rescuing young girls five to ten years of age from sexual slavery and he spoke of the team going into brothels where these young girls are chained up and kept in unimaginable degradation and he spoke of the work of rehabilitation and grace in some of the Christian orphanages and this wonderful freedom that these young girls have found and how difficult and priceless it is and I couldn't help thinking what a brilliant picture of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ when we did not have the first clue of the depth of our true degradation knowing that winning our freedom would cost him the life of his son he loved us and he's freed us forever because the gospel brings us true freedom that's the first gift

Paul wants us to get a hold of here in this passage and very quickly there is a second gift it goes with freedom and it's this the gospel brings true fellowship because you see freedom and privilege are not much fun when you're on your own and when God frees us in the cross of Jesus Christ he also sets us into a fellowship now three times in this passage you will notice this word repute look at verse 6 from those who were reputed to be something what they were makes no difference to me God shows no partiality those I say who are of repute added nothing to me and then in verse 9 when they perceived the grace that was given me James Peter and John who were reputed to be pillars gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised and they would have us remember the poor which thing

I was very eager to do who are these men of repute this is a phrase that the false the pseudo apostles were using to refer to the Jerusalem apostles they were saying to the Galatians you ought to focus on the messenger not the message they felt that if they could load up the best and most eminent credentials on their side Paul would not stand a chance it's a very effective strategy isn't it I mean false teachers usually come with excellent credentials from head office they'll have books and titles and positions and doctorates and again the gospel throws all this up in the air all the carefully constructed hierarchies we have that win self-approval for ourselves and don't get me wrong it's a very necessary part of living in any society isn't it and it's right for those who hold public office to reward and honour those who do good as well as to punish those who do evil and it's right for us as Christians to honour those who do good as well the problem is that we develop all around this a sophisticated system for determining someone's worth and someone's approval and acceptability and I think it's difficult for us as Canadians to see this it's easier to look back 150 years in England and say well in those days it was the classed system it's a very simple system you knew you were you knew where you were in the great chain of being by where you were born you're either born upstairs or downstairs and many of the titles and honours that the English dignify themselves with are nothing more than a way of keeping those who are born downstairs downstairs I wonder what you think the system in Canada here is today you'll have to ponder that on your own but you see this is where the gospel is very dangerous in a culture on the one hand when we come to believe the gospel we are very respectful of the dignity of other people on the other hand we are liberated for the need for approval and it transforms that fear of approval into a fellowship

I think verse 6 is a stunning verse the apostle says about the other apostles what they were makes no difference to me God shows no partiality it's a great phrase God is no respecter of faces God is not impressed with our family title CV success God is completely without prejudice we are all equally in need of his grace he doesn't value you and me according to the gifts that he gave us in the first place he doesn't value you and me according to the opportunities that he's given us or the native intelligence or our performance all good or bad but in the cross of Jesus Christ all our masks are taken off and we are put into a fellowship of the Holy Spirit with one another based on exactly the same thing the forgiveness of our sins that's why Paul and

[22 : 54] Barnabas give to sorry why the apostles give to Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship it's what the gospel does it doesn't set up a new spiritual class system but it takes the barriers that we put up to each other the ones that we are useful for hiding behind and sometimes they are very useful it takes those barriers and it helps us see through them it puts us in the place where our success and our failure is not the determining factor of our community or of ourselves but the fact that we've been rescued and freed by the one Lord Jesus Christ and freedom doesn't come just on its own with Jesus it comes with partnership fellowship sharing because we share in this great thing together so I want to finish with this true freedom and fellowship go together and I think we need to help one another to see the lethal lure of the opposite view of freedom and how easily we succumb to it and we need to help one another to see the beauty and the loveliness of the freedom that Jesus

Christ has won for us on the cross turn away from that selfish view of freedom and the thing about the world's view of freedom is that it always always undermines the fellowship in fact it's a litmus test if the fellowship is having difficulty it is always because some of us or all of us are turning away from the freedom that God has won for us in the Lord Jesus Christ and returning back to the slavery of what the world offers we can never have a true fellowship of the Holy Spirit unless we surrender to the freedom that we have in Christ and the more we hold fast to that freedom the more we deepen and extend and promote the fellowship that we have with each other and we probably need two or three hours to consider this together as a group and if you want to know what it looks like in the painful and very difficult reality of everyday circumstances you're going to have to come back next week when we look at the second half of chapter two you're going to have to take a look at the second half of chapter two