

Gospel Freedom

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[0 : 00] I want you to think back, if you can, to what it was like walking into church for the very first time. Maybe into this church, maybe tonight is your very first time in church. Maybe walking into a new church because you'd moved areas or something.

And that moment as you wander through the door and you kind of take in everything that's around you and the things that you notice. So you might walk in and think, wow, what a fantastic carpet colour.

Or you might walk in and think, I really love the height of this. Who put that fan up there? Like just the different things that you begin to perceive. And then as the service begins, you think, oh, I'm so glad this music is being played properly on an organ with a choir.

Or, you know, I'm really glad there's a band here and it's not being played wrongly on an organ with a choir. Or, you know, I'm really glad that the guy up the front understands how church is supposed to be done and is wearing one of those robes.

And, you know, making sure that we all know that he's clergy and he's official. And you notice different things that stick out. You might think, you know, I'm really glad that the people here understand that church is serious on a Sunday.

[1 : 02] You don't just walk into church and like, you know, you're Birkenstocks or something like that. Not singling anyone out, okay? Just as an example, as an example, you come in and you notice things that you like or things that you don't like.

Things that, you know, make you kind of comfortable. Maybe things that are weird, like why are we facing the wrong direction in the building? You come in and you notice different things. But the question is, as you notice those things, what do you do with that?

Do you then think, well, I guess I'm going to have to change? Or are you already beginning to come up with a plan of how the church can change to get in line with your correct and holy desires of what is good and comfortable?

Or are you already figuring, I know there's another church just a couple of blocks away, so maybe I'll go there and they'll be doing it the right way. I mean, the way I like it. What should change?

You or the church? In Galatians, what we're looking at, there is these two churches, two groups of churches. Paul has written to one group of churches.

[2 : 05] That's the group of churches that he started, the Galatian churches, which is made up of Gentiles. That's basically shorthand for everyone who's not a Jew. The point is, they were basically a whole bunch of different nationalities.

They were from different places, different backgrounds. They were pretty free compared to what was going on in the other churches. Because the Jerusalem churches, which is the Peter, James and John churches, they were the Jewish churches.

They were the churches that had literally thousands of years of tradition shaping the way that they did church. When they'd become Christians, they had all these things that they used to do when they met as Jews that had kind of influenced and carried into the way that they were doing church. Influences on things like the way that they dress, the way that they ate, the way that they met, who was up the front, all that sort of stuff. If you've got these two very different churches and what's going on is there's this clash.

There's this clash of culture and the question of who has to change. There's this pressure in both directions of we're more right than you. We're more holy than you.

[3 : 10] You should do it like us. But particularly for the Galatians, the churches that Paul's planted, there's this pressure coming from the Jerusalem church, the first church, the original church, the place where the church started.

There's this pressure coming from them to say, you've got to be more like us. You've got to be more Jewish if you're going to be a genuine Christian. So what does the gospel do?

The gospel that Paul's been preaching, the gospel that Paul is fighting for. What does the gospel do for these two different groups of churches? I mean, how does it make it possible for two completely different groups to function as one church?

Because that's kind of the point. They are the one church. They're following the same God. They're depending on the same grace that God showed them by sending His Son to die on the cross. That's the goal when you read through Scripture.

When you get to the right of the end in the book of Revelation, the picture we get is a unified church, a church from all over the world, a church that is incredibly diverse from every tribe, nation and tongue, but that's unified.

[4 : 20] That's one as it seeks to worship one God by the same grace. Even us here at St. Paul's, we have a heart to be that church that God is building, to be that one diverse church, to be transcultural, to reflect the rich diversity that surrounds us here in Chatswood, here in Sydney, here in Australia and throughout the world.

We want to be a reflection of that diversity as a testimony to the power of the gospel to transform us. But the question that remains is, how does the gospel transform us so that we can be that kind of unified diversity?

Because it sounds nice. Everyone together makes sense. Sounds like a great idea. But how does the gospel actually enable people who like completely different things to be church together?

Well, last week we were looking at the second half of chapter one and Paul was working really hard to show us that his gospel message was separate, not different, but separate from what was going on with the Jerusalem apostles in Jerusalem.

His ministry was different. He got his revelation direct from Jesus. And so it's strange that we begin this passage with him heading to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles.

[5 : 41] Last week he was really trying to make it clear, I'm just doing my thing. I mean, it's the same gospel, but I'm doing it over here and they're doing it over there and I don't need them. And then in this passage, we open up at the beginning there and 14 years later, granted that's a bit of a gap, but if the lack of approval was a badge of honour in chapter one, it seems strange to now go up and present the gospel to them as like needing some sort of stamp of approval, some sort of official tick from them.

So why go now? Let's have a look. Verse one. Ash read it out for us. Then after 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem. This is his second visit.

This time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to the revelation and meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles.

I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. So Paul arrives in Jerusalem as a response to a revelation. That's really important.

Paul's not being called into the principal's office here because he's done the wrong thing. This is not, you know, like a power move where you've got to come in and justify what you're doing. God's arranged this. God has said, you need to go up there and he's not there to defend himself.

[7 : 03] I remember last week, the big shift for Paul with the gospel is that he's not a people pleaser anymore. The tick from these three men, Peter, James and John, as important as they are, doesn't actually matter for Paul personally.

So why is he going up? It's right there at the end of verse two. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.

Paul's not concerned that his gospel might be wrong. He's already made it clear there is only one gospel and his gospel came from Jesus and the proof of it is in the transformation, even in his own life.

The problem going on for Paul was that as he's traveling around to these different places preaching that Jesus has died and that he offers forgiveness for free, that it's only by grace.

As he moves on to the next town, to the next group of people, there were these groups of Jews that were kind of following him around and they would come in just after Paul had left and go, that message you just heard was fantastic.

[8 : 08] It's changed your life. This is what was going on in the Galatian church as well. And go, it's great. Jesus is great. Now all you need to do to be really Christian, to be proper Christians, is be

Jewish like us because the church started with us.

So you want to be like us because we're the original ones. So just change a little bit. Believe in Jesus, but also be circumcised. Also have your food laws like we do.

Also do the things that we like to do. So they're preaching a grace plus gospel and claiming that they were sent by the apostles in Jerusalem, claiming that they had their authority.

And so this little episode that Paul's describing here in chapter two is like this showdown between those false teachers that have been chasing Paul and Paul's gospel. And then you've got Peter, James and John there to basically finally and fully tell us which gospel is legitimate.

The result of this showdown, verse three. Not even Titus who was with me was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was Greek. This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.

[9 : 25] This is why Paul bothers going to Jerusalem. He doesn't care what these false teachers think. He doesn't even care what the real apostles think. The issue is that if the gospel is lost, it's the difference between freedom and slavery.

He cares for the church that he planted. He cares that they don't lose this gift that God has given them. And so he goes up to present the gospel boldly. And the result is that not even Titus was compelled to be circumcised.

Now, Paul's kind of clever in what he does here. He knows he's going up for a bit of a meeting and he doesn't go by himself. He takes two people with him. They're there in verse one. First, he takes Barnabas.

So Barnabas is another Jew. So as soon as Barnabas walks into the room in Jerusalem, everyone's like, oh yeah, he's a Jew. Tick, he's one of us. Fantastic. And Barnabas can tell them that he's witnessed the power of what Paul has been doing in Paul's ministry.

But then as well as Barnabas, he takes Titus. Now, Titus is a Greek. He's very not Jewish. He hasn't been raised with Jewish traditions.

[10 : 31] He doesn't understand how Jews do life, let alone Jewish Christians do following Jesus. For Titus, he just heard the gospel, heard what Jesus has done and accepted the grace of God.

That's it. That's his Christian story. He doesn't have all these extra Jewish rules. And for him to stand in front of this group of Jews means what they're talking about isn't just an abstract issue out there anymore.

We can't just talk about whether or not some people have to do these extra things to be proper Christians. We have to look Titus in the eyes and say, if you want to be a Christian, you have to be circumcised.

See, suddenly this becomes a concrete human issue. The gospel is not about some vague points of doctrine. It's not bullet points.

The gospel saves people. And Paul wants the apostles to look Titus in the eyes and say once and for all what the true gospel is.

[11 : 35] Now, a quick side point that I want to just make for us, stepping out of this for a sec. This is a really important and helpful way for us to engage with the issues that we engage with in the world.

As Christians, as we engage with things and we argue for truth and we speak into our culture about what God wants, it's really important for us to engage with the people who embody those issues. When we just engage an issue, it's really easy to slip into being harsh. It's really easy to slip into being unloving. It's really easy to forget that this actually has emotional force and weight as we speak about things.

But when there is a person, a face attached to the issue that we're engaging, people we know are created in the image of God. People we know receive compassion when they encounter Jesus. And we know as Christians, we are called to show compassion to people. Not at the expense of truth, but truth spoken in love. Now, I'm just going to leave that there.

[12 : 45] That's just a little side point. That probably speaks into a whole bunch of stuff. That you might be engaging, but we're just going to park that for a second as just a little helpful model that Paul gave to us. But we're back in here.

In the presence of these Jewish apostles, remember these are about as impressive and intimidating as it can get to be in a room with James, Peter and John. And in their presence, Titus listens to these arguments from the false teachers about what he has to do to be a Christian.

He weighs it against the gospel that he has heard proclaimed, the gospel that has powerfully transformed him and Paul and all the people in the churches in Galatians.

And he is not compelled. That's a really important word in this passage and in the life of any Christian. He is not compelled.

In light of the fact that he knows Jesus has died for him. He knows that he can only be in God's family because of God's grace and mercy. Because of that, Titus knows he is free from any extra requirement.

[13 : 52] He knows there is no extra hurdles. And so he chooses to not be circumcised. Chooses not to jump through this hoop that's being put in front of him.

What the gospel has done for him and for us, if we're Christians, is draw a line, create a distinction between what is cultural, that is, what is the way we see things, the way we do things, the way we think about things, and what is gospel.

That is unchangeable truth. A line has been drawn between what we must do, the non-negotiables, and what we have freedom to choose.

It's kind of like, if you think about the beginning when you walk into church, it's the difference between walking in and deciding, you know what, I don't like the music or I don't want to praise God at all.

Now, because of who God is, he demands praise. That's not up for negotiation. That's not up for grabs. If you're following him, the one who created the world in his mercy, chose to send his son to take your punishment, he is praiseworthy.

[15 : 04] That's what Christians are. They're praise givers. That's a gospel thing. That's not up for grabs. If we were to take a vote, you know, who wants to praise God when we gather? I don't care what you vote because the Bible says we do it.

How we do it, if we were to vote on that, you know, like whether we use an organ, whether we have no instruments, whether we insist on drums only, whether we sing loud or soft, whether we do the same line over and over and over again, whether we have a different song every week, whether we only do songs that are written by certain people whose names start with some certain letter or whatever it is, those are cultural things.

They're not bad, but they're issues about how we like it, how we're used to it, what we're familiar with, what's comfortable for us.

And what the gospel has done has made sure that those two things stay separate. Now, that doesn't mean it's bad to have an opinion about how you like to do praising God.

That doesn't mean it's wrong to say, I prefer when we do it a certain way. But what it does is stop us from taking that preference, that comfort, that thing that we like and dragging it over here and making it an issue that we can't be together over, an issue that we expect other people to meet, a requirement that people have to fit if we're going to consider them brothers and sisters in Christ.

[16 : 32] See, for the Galatians, circumcision is a culturally Jewish thing. It's what Jews do. It's not what non-Jews do. It's not a bad thing. It's not an unchristian thing.

But it's just not a gospel thing. And so, basically, the point is, Titus can get circumcised if he wants to, but he just doesn't have to.

It makes no difference to whether or not he's a Christian. Now, the interesting thing is, if you go to Acts 16 and do this in your community group during the week, Paul is in another situation where this circumcision issue comes up, but he's travelling with a guy called Timothy, another one of his ministry partners.

And in that instance, he decides to circumcise Timothy for the sake of fellowship with the people that they're trying to minister to. So you've got the same issue and on two different occasions, Paul makes two different choices because he understands that he's free to do that.

It's not a gospel issue. He's choosing to do it. And the point here is that Christian freedom is not freedom for you to do whatever you want. Christian freedom is not a get out of jail free card that means you can just be like, no one can tell me what to do.

[17 : 48] I'm going to do it my way. The gospel is the good news that God has accepted you on no basis of your own, but because of his mercy and because of Jesus' death.

And the result is that you are now free to choose. free to choose what parts of your own culture and the cultures around you you will embrace and which bits you won't.

But the question now is not do I have to. I mean, when our cultures clash and I'm using culture in a really broad sense here, I'm not just saying that the ethnicity or the country you're from, if you live on the North Shore, you're part of a culture.

If you're uni-educated, you're part of a culture. If you're into a particular sport, you're part of a culture. The things that shape the way we think, what we value, that's what I mean by culture. And the gospel is saying you're now free to choose which bits of the cultural shapers in your life you're going to hold on to as non-negotiables and which bits you're going to choose to either embrace in others or deny in yourself.

But the question is, how do we choose? How does Paul choose? It's there in verse 5. How does he make the decision here with Titus?

[19 : 12] It says, we did not give in to them for a moment. Why? So that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. The truth of the gospel, that's what's driving him here.

Will exercising freedom in this occasion preserve the truth that God accepts people by grace or will it confuse it? Will it make it muddy for other people?

See, for Paul and Titus, this isn't just a fight for Titus to not be circumcised. They're not just trying to win the day or win the moment. This is a landmark fight for the freedom of all of the Christians in Galatia, for us as Christians now to make it clear that you do not need to fit Jewish cultural requirements if you're going to follow Jesus.

You just need to trust Jesus. gospel freedom, Christian freedom is freedom from compulsion. It's the removal of things that you have to do, which means not just the external things that other people tell you you have to do, but also the things that you think you have to do.

One of my favourite things about our church is the cultural diversity that we have in our church. You don't have to look far to see people who have had different background, different upbringing, different experience of childhood.

[20 : 36] But one of the issues when we talk about culture like this and we talk about gospel is that we primarily think of culture out there. We primarily think you have a culture, I'm normal.

So the way you do things, that's your cultural stuff. The way I do things is the way everybody should do things if they knew as much as I do. We don't recognise that we have cultural things that shape us.

It just doesn't feel like culture when it's the way we've always done it. And that's especially true if you're the majority. And so the risk is we don't take our culture and hold it up to the gospel.

We don't take our culture and look through the lens of the gospel and decide what we need to keep and what we need to let go. And instead, we take our preferences and we elevate them over into the gospel issue category.

And so you need to love Jesus but you need to love him the way that I love him with a full band or in a church that faces sideways or dressed a certain way.

[21 : 45] The best example I could think of with this and I'm no expert on them but the Amish. The Amish are a particular strand of religious group that have kind of identified themselves culturally.

They dress a certain way and they all dress the same way. They've decided to reject certain things like various technologies. They don't shave some of them. There's all these really specific cultural distinctions and those cultural markers are what mark you as in with them or out.

If you don't tick those boxes, you're not in. And these people claim to be following Jesus. And look, some of them might be trying but the issue is they've missed this gift of freedom in the gospel that God has provided.

The gospel has set us free from the compulsion and instead replaced what you have to do with the choice. That's what freedom is about.

He's given us the choice to forego, to give up our own cultural entitlements, to give up the things the way we like them, the way that makes it most comfortable for us and to accommodate and embrace the cultures around us for the purpose of preserving the gospel truth and proclaiming the gospel truth.

[23 : 06] It's not even about how comfortable it is for us. The reason we choose to sometimes let go of what we like, to be uncomfortable, is so that the gospel truth might be clear.

Clear for the people around us who maybe get something the way that they like for a change. Clear for us because we can begin to realise that the way we like it isn't necessarily the best thing.

Jesus is. Jesus anyway is a good thing. This is what transcultural looks like. We all bring our cultural background with us and then we let the gospel dictate which bits stay part of who we are as a community and which bits we need to get rid of and which bits we choose.

That's the key word. Which bits we choose to get rid of for the sake of being unified in the gospel of grace. Which bits will I let go so that grace might be obvious?

The gospel set the Gentile Christians free from the requirement of becoming culturally Jewish. It basically said you don't have to.

[24 : 21] There's no compulsion and therefore what it did was set them free to choose to. So someone like Timothy can choose to out of love not just based on what was convenient but based on what would preserve the truth of the gospel.

What would declare to the people around what would best show the security he had in Jesus? What would best show that Jesus is completely satisfying?

And the answer was giving up what was his right. The gospel sets us free so that our diversity might be an opportunity. The gospel sets us free so that when our cultures do clash when we have different ideas about how things should be done how people relate how we do church whatever it is we have an opportunity to choose sacrificial love and in sharing discomfort preserving the truth of the gospel.

First thing the gospel does is set us free from compulsion the second thing is it prioritizes grace.

What the gospel doesn't do is remove difference.

The gospel is not this big steamroller that just gets rid of any difference of opinion and turns us into like you know vanilla flavoured church community where we all like the same thing like it the same way.

[25 : 48] The parts of you that are unique and different are an expression of God's creativity they matter to him but what the gospel does is when we find these areas of difference it enables us to focus on what matters most what's most important.

So remember in this story Paul is visiting Jerusalem to get the gospel that he's been preaching vindicated against the false teachers he's there to ensure that his churches won't be dragged away from this one good news message and he's there to connect with the Jerusalem apostles with Peter James and John.

Now on what basis does Paul connect with those three guys? I mean let's just think about how much they would have had in common.

They're four Jewish men all in the ballpark of the same age all with Jewish upbringings all probably living in roughly the same area trained in Jewish tradition eating the same foods familiar with kosher diets certain holy days to be observed and so what basis of their commonality does Paul use to establish this connection with all those to choose from?

Grace. Have a look at verse 6 as for those who are held in high esteem whatever they were makes no difference to me God does not show favoritism they added nothing to my message.

[27 : 24] Now it sounds a bit like Paul's having a crack at them there but really what he's doing is he's saying unlike the false teachers who take all their authority from these three guys what matters for him is the message of the grace in the gospel the message of grace in the gospel.

On the contrary verse 7 they recognized they had been entrusted to the uncircumcised just as Peter had been to the circumcised for God who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles James Cephas and John those esteemed as pillars gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.

They agreed we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised the gospel of grace they didn't add to his message the message of forgiveness offered by Jesus to people who don't deserve it that's what mattered most and therefore keep it verse 9 James Cephas and John those esteemed as pillars gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.

The official warm embrace because they recognized the grace of God in Paul in his ministry they could see God at work their ministries were completely different one group is trying to unreligion Jewish people so that they can discover Jesus Paul's walking into people who have no idea about who God is and how that works and introducing them to Jesus you've got the quite religious church over here you've got the kind of free church who's trying to figure out what they're supposed to do and how they're supposed to do it there was so much that was different about it but their unity was established on what mattered most they both received God's grace God was at work in both of

them personally and in their ministry and so they could see in Paul in his life transformed and in the fruit of his ministry that he was a brother now that's not to say that Christians don't and can't have other things in common you know these guys had a whole lot in common but what came first was grace what the gospel does is prioritize the most important bit grace what the gospel does is create the opportunity for someone like me to have a deeper connection with an 80 year old retired woman who was never married born in Africa spent time as a slave never graduated high school but has been transformed by grace the gospel creates the potential for a deep eternal connection with that person more so than the 35 year old father of two who lives next door to me goes for the giants but doesn't know Jesus because the gospel is the most important bit it doesn't delete the fact that we're completely different but it prioritizes grace it brings grace to the front and draws unlike people together in the joy and freedom of being forgiven the gospel frees us from needing things to be the way we like them because Jesus is enough and so I can delight in singing a song that I've never heard of in a weird tune that makes no sense to me with my brothers and sisters in Christ because it's about Jesus I can delight in sitting in a funny direction I can delight in going and talking to somebody who is nothing like me but who shares the same grace of God to be forgiven the gospel frees us to be able to choose to endure discomfort out of love for God and love for our brothers and sisters it sets us free from compulsion it prioritizes grace so that in our diversity the truth of the gospel might be preserved and proclaimed I've shared with you before about an older man that I was in church with once he'd been part of that church for a long long time decades and decades he'd been an elder or a leader in the church for pretty much that whole duration and he'd been there in the days when the church was bursting at the seams you couldn't get a seat and he was around long enough to see the church nearly closed down because it didn't have enough people the reason I met this man and we crossed paths was because I was part of a team that got sent into this church to try and revitalize it and get it going again

[32 : 15] I was 25 and he was about 75 spiritually there was not a lot of overlap in our experiences of following Jesus and being fed as Christians except of course the grace that we both discovered when we heard the gospel he was a suit and tie man in church I was a jeans and thongs he preferred hymns on an organ I prefer newer songs with guitars and bands we were more different than the same but I learned a lot about grace through being at church with that man I watched as week in and week out he chose remember he was one of the leaders who invited this random group of young Christians to come and change things up he chose to forego things that had been part of his spiritual journey things that he'd loved ways that he was used to doing things he chose to give up comfort in the way church happened every Sunday to sacrifice things that he liked so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for people like me who were nothing like him and for people who were all around that church but had never heard of Jesus he just longed to see them walk in the door and encounter

Jesus encounter the grace that he had discovered the gospel set him free from having to do things a certain way and it prioritized grace we are a diverse church full of cultures and sub cultures and that could be a source of tension for us that could be a source of difficulty in fact if we're honest sometimes that is a source of tension for us we want things done differently we want them done more our way even if we don't use those words but our diversity could be a gift from God because what it does is it forces us to be transformed by the gospel in how we love and serve one another what it does is force us to recognize hey I've got a culture that I'm bringing here I've got my way of doing things and I need to hold it up to the gospel and until somebody challenged me and goes I don't like it like that

I'll just assume it's the right way that's why it is a gift from God that we are surrounded by people who are nothing like us so that maybe just maybe we might discover that there are things that we do and think and say that are non gospel things cultural issues that we have elevated and now we expect of one another our diversity is God's gift gift because against this varied backdrop of people this one as well we might see the grace of God more clearly and then because we see it get to live in the joy and freedom that can only be found in that grace let me pray for us Father God we want to acknowledge that it's easier when we're all the same it's easier when we get it the way that we like it it's easier when people want to do things the way we're used to having them done it's easier to fall into the trap of thinking the way that we've done it is the right way

God please use the diversity that is in this room and in our church to help us to see ourselves through a gospel lens help us to recognize that grace matters help us to see one another with grace

first help us to not look for hobbies to connect over but to begin with the truth that we have been forgiven by the blood of Jesus God we thank you for setting us free for removing compulsion for giving us the deep security of knowing that we are irreversibly loved God we pray that as people encounter our church community that the truth of the gospel will be loud and clear because of the way we choose to sacrifice out of love for one another thank you for Jesus thank you that he's better than any particular way of doing things better than any comfort or familiarity God help us to hold on to him to let go of everything else and to be more satisfied than we've ever been amen