

Galatians 5:1-6 (Independence Day)

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[0 : 00] What does it mean to be free?

And how do we stay that way? It's Independence Day weekend. We've all been celebrating by grilling meat and blowing things up.

Rightfully so. It's been good. This is the weekend when we celebrate our political and our national freedoms. And without a doubt, those are good things to celebrate, be thankful for.

But what about at a deeper level? What does it mean to be truly free? And how, if at all, do we stay that way?

This morning we're taking a one-week break from our Hebrew series and going to the letter of Galatians. This letter of Paul has often been called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty, of Christian freedom.

[1 : 04] It's here that we find loud and clear, perhaps more than anywhere else in the New Testament, that the gospel, that Christianity, means freedom. True, lasting, soul-satisfying freedom.

Now, before we dive into our sermon text this morning, let me give some just quick context. The book of Galatians falls roughly into three parts. Chapters 1 and 2 are mainly biography.

Paul is telling his story and how his story highlights the gospel of grace. And then in chapters 3 and 4, we find mostly theology, where they unpack some of the depths of what the gospel is all about.

And then finally, in chapters 5 and 6, we find mostly ethics. In other words, what does it mean to live in light of all of this? But throughout the whole, Paul is defending and declaring that this gospel, this good news about Jesus Christ, is above all a message of freedom.

And where we're looking this morning, chapter 5, verse 1, is really the high point of the whole letter. It's the rousing climax of the whole thing. So let's pick up there.

[2 : 18] Galatians 5, chapter 1. Just across the page from where we read earlier in our service. Paul says this, For freedom, Christ has set us free.

Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law.

You have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Let's pray together. Oh, Lord Jesus, we pray this morning that the ringing message of freedom in this passage, in this book, Lord, in your word, would become real to our hearts.

[3 : 40] God, that we would live as those who've been set free and stand firm in it. We ask this in your name, Lord. Amen. Well, 5.1 says it pretty clear, doesn't it?

The central idea, the main thrust of this passage is this exhortation to stand firm in the freedom of Christ. But before we look at why we need to stand firm and how we actually go about standing firm, first we have to consider exactly what this freedom in Christ is.

Because we have all sorts of ideas of what freedom means today, right? I mean, on the political level, there's freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and freedom to elect your own leaders. Good things.

But of course, Paul's talking about a different, deeper sort of freedom here, isn't he? What is it? I think if you ask the typical person on the street what freedom means or what freedom looks like, they'd say something like being able to pursue my personal fulfillment without lots of external rules or authorities getting in the way.

In other words, having a clear path to my own personal happiness without someone else telling me what to be or do. Or to put it even more simply, to be free to do what I want so long as it doesn't hurt anybody else.

[4 : 58] Isn't that freedom for us? Freedom from constraints. And on the surface, sounds good. It's autonomous freedom from all constraints.

But you know, when we think about it, it's actually pretty deeply flawed. Think about a musician. One of our neighbors is literally a concert pianist.

So when we get off the elevator on our floor in our building, we hear this incredible piano music flowing into the hallway. And most of it is just lightning fast. Sometimes I think our neighbor has three hands or something as quickly as he's able to play.

It's melodic. It's rich. It's stunning. And I think if you were to come over and hear him play, I think you would say that he has incredible freedom on his instrument. That he could play probably any piece of music that you would give to him and probably do it with ease.

But here's the thing that Beth and I have learned living across the hall. That that sort of freedom takes incredible discipline. Because he practices a lot.

[6 : 03] And he practices hard. And of course, that's good news for me and Beth. Because we get serenaded every night and we don't have to pay for the concert tickets. But you see, real true freedom doesn't come from being merely free from constraints or rules or discipline or structure.

Freedom often comes because of those things, doesn't it? But our common conception of freedom is deeply flawed at another level. It's flawed because this idea of freedom being merely freedom from constraints, it simply can't give us what we truly want at the end of the day.

Because what we want deep down is love. Isn't it? Is relationship, is to be known and to know another. But if the freedom we're pursuing is mainly freedom from constraints, if that's our highest form of freedom, then we'll never get it.

Because the freedom of love is the freedom of limiting yourself for another, isn't it? The freedom of turning my life around another as they do the same for me.

Isn't that what makes the strongest friendships? When two people are willing to give to one another time and their attention and their gifts, when they share and they shape their passions together, isn't that what makes the sweetest marriages?

[7 : 27] When two people willingly seek the good of the other, even when and especially when it's costly to do so. So don't you see, if freedom means freedom to be and do what I want so long as no one else gets hurt, then essentially I'm saying that freedom means being left alone.

And at the end of the day, I think that's exactly where that sort of freedom gets us. We end up alone.

So I think all this makes it clear that we need a new freedom. And we need a better one. And we need a richer one. And we need a more lasting one. And that's what Christ offers.

Of course, if you're new to Christianity, if you've come here with a friend, maybe you're thinking that freedom and Christianity have nothing in common. Maybe Christianity just seems to you like a bunch of restrictive rules and regulations.

And you know, if that's what Christianity were about, I'd agree with you. But this whole letter that we're looking at this morning and practically the whole New Testament is written to turn that notion on its head.

[8 : 42] You see, what we commonly call religion, a bunch of rules and regulations that I have to keep for God to accept me, that's what Paul describes in verse 4 of our passage when he speaks of you who would be justified by the law.

This is the mindset of thinking that my moral performance is what will put me in the right, is what will justify me with God. And that, Paul says, is the very opposite of Christianity.

Christ has come to set us free from all of that. For freedom, Christ has set us free, verse 1 says. But freedom from what, exactly? What has Christ set us free from? Well, it's clear when you read the rest of Galatians that Paul primarily means freedom from the law. What exactly does that mean?

Well, two things. On the one hand, it means we're free from having to keep all the so-called ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, like circumcision, and all the kosher food laws, and all the Sabbath regulations, all the things that marked Old Testament Israel off from the world and were representational of their ceremonial cleanness.

[9 : 54] You see, all those things no longer apply now that Christ has come. This is what we've been studying in Hebrews over the course of the year. It's Jesus who makes us clean once and for all.

And all those ceremonies and regulations were pointers or shadows to Christ, who is the substance, who is the reality. What they merely represented on the outside, Christ has fulfilled once for all in our hearts.

So Christ has set us free from the ceremonial laws. And as a quick aside, that's why Christians aren't being inconsistent when it seems like we do follow some Old Testament laws and we don't follow others.

I think some people think that we're just sort of picking and choosing what to obey, but in fact that's not the case. It's not arbitrary or inconsistent. It's actually living in line, living consistently with the reality of what Jesus has done.

Because Jesus makes us clean before God. Because faith in Him is what defines the people of God. Because He's fulfilled the intention of all those ceremonies. Then those kinds of rules simply don't apply in the same way anymore.

[11 : 09] In fact, it would be inconsistent to keep on doing them in the same way. It would be a functional denial of what Christ has done. And that's part of what Paul is getting on about in Galatians. In other words, he's saying, look, when the sun has risen, you don't need to go on lighting candles anymore.

When Christ makes you clean, you don't need to go on keeping the ceremonial law. But on the other hand, we're not just free from the law's ceremonies.

We're free from the law in an even deeper sense. Galatians tells us that Christ has set us free from the law's curse. And this strikes to the heart of what it is that makes Christianity utterly unique.

You see, friends, God's moral law contains His perfect will for our lives. This is how we live as God made us to live. This is how we bear His image.

This is how we worship Him and acknowledge Him as our Creator and Lord. And if we had kept God's law holy and perfectly, then it would pronounce us blessed. It would declare us holy and acceptable to God.

[12 : 23] But of course, that's not what happens. In each of our lives, instead of gladly following God's way, we make ourselves our own lords and rebel against God's law and willingly alienate ourselves from Him.

And so instead of pronouncing a blessing over us for keeping God's law, the law pronounces a curse over us for breaking it.

And so we stand condemned and rejected by the One who made us and who alone can fulfill us. And the irony is is that the more and more we try to get ourselves out of that situation, the deeper and deeper we go.

And of course, deep down, we all feel this reality, don't we? Think with me. Have you ever wondered why you want so badly for other people to approve of you?

Why you'd do anything sometimes to get them to accept you or to praise you? Why you'd put on such a front to get people to like you? Why do you bend the truth sometimes to get your peers to accept you or to think highly of you?

[13 : 45] Why are you racked with bitterness at times because your parents didn't love you or give you the kind of upbringing you wanted? Why is your fuse so short when other people critique you and you get angry or you're thrown into despair?

In other words, why are we so hungry for others to bless us and to pronounce us right and acceptable in their sight? Could it be that there's a deeper blessing that we've lost?

Could it be that the reason we're starved for someone to bless us is because when it really counts and where it really counts in God's eyes we're under a curse and having lost his blessing it drives us to find a substitute blessing wherever we can find it only to find of course that it never works and we simply become slaves to the approval of others and no matter how much we get we still need more and if we don't get it we spiral down into anger and bitterness and self-hatred and then in our anger and bitterness or self-pity we start to medicate ourselves with sex or with work or with substances or whatever and the tragedy is we don't even see where the real problem lies but friends there's good news the passage we read earlier says when the fullness of time had come

God sent forth his son born of woman born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons the message of Christianity is that God has lifted the curse through his own son and made all who believe his sons and daughters blessed loved heirs forever and if we ask how how does Christ redeem us from the lost curse what does he do how does he bring this blessing to us Paul tells us earlier in chapter 313 he says Christ redeemed us that is freed us from the curse of the law by nothing less than becoming a curse for us you see God doesn't merely set aside the law or ignore it how could he it's his own righteous holy character no he doesn't set us aside instead of setting aside the law he fulfills it the curse

I deserved Christ bore in my place in your place in the place of everyone who trusts him but here's the really radical thing is that Christ doesn't just take our curse but he then turns and gives us his blessing you see Jesus Christ kept the law perfectly he is the only one who fully deserves God's complete and total approval and the gospel is that when we link our lives to him in faith it's like a marriage union that legally all that's mine becomes his and all that's his becomes mine and in this union with Christ by faith he takes my curse and I get his blessing and he takes my unrighteousness and my condemnation and gives me his righteousness and his justification and now

[17:48] God looks at me and he looks at you if you are in Christ and he sees us through his son beautiful radiant perfect friends that's freedom freedom from the law's curse freedom from ever having to earn a standing before God through what I am or what I do the freedom of knowing deep down that God views me as his own without any reservation without any hesitation that God's not sitting around waiting for me to become a better version of myself so that he'll accept me that he loves me not because of my performance but because of Jesus' performance I wonder if you've ever had a hint of that freedom when another loves you not for what they're going to get from you but simply because they love you isn't that one of the truest forms of freedom that we ever experience to know that my performance can't change the other's regard of me that's the sort of freedom that makes you strong that's the sort of freedom that brings you peace that's the sort of freedom that will cause you to go out into the world with a confidence and with a humility with a freedom like nothing else and in our human dealings that kind of freedom is rare we hardly think that that kind of freedom could be possible and yet that's the freedom that

Christ gives Jesus the one who loved me and gave himself for me you see friends to be counted righteous to be justified before God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that's true freedom there's nothing else like it but what Paul's telling us in the rest of this passage is that this freedom is a freedom that's always in danger that's why Paul says we have to stand firm standing firm here is a military term it means to be diligent and ready and deliberate and active you see our freedom in Christ is always in danger of being stolen away because our hearts are so prone to go back into a performance mindset and to think that I'm right because I've performed well or that I'm right because I've done certain things and of course this happens subtly it doesn't happen overnight the false teachers who showed up in

Galatia that Paul is sort of arguing against in this letter they weren't flat out rejecting Jesus as the Messiah they were simply saying that in order to be saved you had to be circumcised too after all it was something that God commanded in the law of Moses who could argue with that but in verses 2 through 4 Paul is saying you can't have it both ways it's either all of grace through what Jesus has done or you lose the whole thing in other words if you add any human work or merit or contribution as a requirement for salvation Paul says you nullify Christ in your life you're severed from him and here's the deep irony that we can become very very morally scrupulous that we can do everything right and if we're doing it to earn God's salvation

Paul says it's driving you away from him after all Paul says it won't just stop at circumcision it can't circumcision is a promise it's an obligation to keep the whole law it's like turning the key of a car and once you turn the key the engine starts running and you've got to drive the thing or turn it off and get out of course few of us are tempted to accept circumcision today as a requirement for salvation if you are talk to me at the door because I've never met anyone who thinks that but aren't we just like the Galatians at heart aren't we still tempted to think that faith in Christ by itself aren't we tempted to think that faith in Christ alone isn't quite sufficient to make us right that surely we need to add something don't we and of course the challenge here is that so many of us would intellectually agree that we're saved by faith alone but do we live that way we get the right answer on a test sure if I hand it out in the bulletin a check mark are you saved by faith alone or by a mixture of faith in

your works you would probably all say faith alone amen but what about in the day to day of our lives is there something else that we functionally put in there perhaps a good question to ask ourselves is this what do I want to be known for as you think about your life as we think about our life together what do we want to be known for you know if we were to ask that question of the false teachers who showed up in

Galatia they probably would have said well we want to be known for keeping the law of Moses in fact in chapter 2 verse 12 they're actually called the circumcision party circumcision doesn't sound like a party to me but there you go the circumcision party now we don't know if that's what they called themselves but that's what they were known for what about us as a church what do we want to be known for being the cool hip church being the social justice church being the expository preaching church none of those are bad things but friends if they start to stand above the gospel of the grace of Jesus in our affections and in our aims and in what we want to be known for then we're on dangerous ground and our freedom will start slipping from our hands but what about in your individual life what do you personally want to be known for running a successful business fighting world hunger raising a godly household of course these are all excellent things and the gospel will empower you to do them and to do them well with joy and with courage but is that ultimately what you want to be known for the danger is that any of these good things can start to slide into the center and suddenly our identity isn't content with

[25 : 18] Christ alone instead it has to be Christ and success at work or Christ and making a difference globally or Christ and having a happy family to be okay we start to say I need him and I want to be known for him and as soon as our heart starts saying that our freedom is slipping from our grasp because whatever comes after that and whether it be circumcision or anything else it will ultimately drive you away from Christ and his grace and into a yoke of slavery that's what Paul says over and over and over in verses 2 through 4 this doesn't mean that a genuine Christian can lose their salvation but it does mean that we can end up living under a crippling load of guilt and shame or under an ugly facade of pride and pretension and that is simply not what Christ has freed us for he's freed us for freedom and we have to stand firm in it and in the last two verses of our passage we see how how is it that we stand firm we stand firm

Paul says by seeing that faith alone through the spirit makes us eager in hope and energetic in love look at verse 5 for through the spirit by faith not by works not by the law through the spirit by faith we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness our faith in Christ makes us eager for the future the hope of righteousness here is God's final verdict over our lives and if we're headed toward that day on the basis of our performance friends the last thing we will do is eagerly wait for it we might anxiously dread it or if we think we're good and we've kept all God's laws we might pridefully presume upon that day but either way the outcome will be far from hopeful but in Christ friends we know what God's verdict will be because he's already pronounced it over us it will be one of complete approval and acceptance for its basis is the perfect righteousness of Jesus and that means neither dread nor presumption but eager expectation for what the future holds for on that day we'll stand before

God in the new creation and he will look upon us as his radiant bride without a spot without a wrinkle without a blemish and he'll delight in us forever he'll sing over us the prophets say in delight and Paul says that this faith fueled hope comes through the spirit God's given us his own spirit to make this true in our lives he's not leaving us high and dry he's put his own self into us to make this faith real and live in our hearts faith itself is the gift of the spirit but the spirit also fans this gift into a flame and makes the things of Christ real to our hearts so they become bright with hope friends as Christians we should meditate often about the way God views us in Christ do you do you make it a spiritual practice daily to think about yourself the way that your father thinks about you in Christ or do you spend more time thinking about your screw ups and your failures and your mistakes instead of thinking about the fact that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us do you spend more time thinking of yourself as lost and gone and wayward instead of seeing yourself and viewing yourself and telling yourself what's true that in Christ you're his son you're his daughter that in Christ you're his bride radiant with beauty friends we should be thinking deeply about the day when God will pronounce us publicly and finally righteous for eternity when our screw ups and failures and sins will be overturned when God bangs the gavel and says you're righteous because of my son friends let us grow eager in our hope and then we'll stand firm in our freedom and the spirit not only makes our faith full of eager hope but full of energetic love

look at verse 6 for in

Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only faith working through love we see here that the sort of faith that unites us to Christ isn't merely just an intellectual belief it's not merely ticking boxes it's a sort of faith that trusts Christ to be so sufficient for salvation it's a giving of ourselves to him in such complete dependence that love comes rushing forth for others compare it to a circumcision mindset where we're centered on our own moral achievements you know if that's us we won't genuinely love love can't flow from that because we might you know you