

Galatians 5:1

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. It's good to see you this morning. We're going to continue our series in Galatians this morning with Galatians chapter 5. Would you turn there with me?

Galatians chapter 5. It's in the New Testament section of the Pew Bible. If you open that up and you find a bunch of guys' names like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, keep going.

After Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, you'll find Galatians. We're going to look at Galatians chapter 5, verse 1. This morning we actually come to a new section in the book of Galatians.

You see the first two chapters broadly conceived of Galatians are really about Paul's autobiography, where he's making a case for the authority of his message.

And in the next two chapters, chapters 3 and 4, are really a sort of foray into the theology of the gospel. But now finally, as we come to sort of the last third, the last stretch of this book, chapters 5 and 6, Paul is turning his sights towards ethics.

[1 : 07] What does it mean to live the Christian life? How do we do it? What motivation is there? What power is there? In light of the gospel, how do we live? Chapters 5 and 6.

And that's where we start this morning, chapter 5. So if you've turned there, let me pray for us. We'll read and we'll dive in. Let's pray. God, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it's living and active.

Lord, that it's sharp and penetrating. Lord, that it gets down deep into the very issue of our heart and our souls. Lord, we pray this morning that you would come by your spirit and take your word.

And Lord, you would speak to us in that deep place. Lord, as your people, as those who are seeking you. Lord, as those who, perhaps even this morning, don't know much about you.

Lord, we come from many different places and walks of life. Many different places spiritually. But Lord, we've come to meet you. To hear from your word. To encounter you.

[2 : 07] So we pray, Lord, that you would make good on your promise to speak to us this morning. In Christ's name, amen. Galatians chapter 5. We're going to focus on verse 1 this morning.

But I'm going to read for us verses 1 through 6. 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 eagerly await the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.

But only faith, but only faith, working through love. Well, freedom. It's a big word, isn't it?

[3 : 10] Sociologist Robert Bellah once wrote that freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value. But what do we mean by freedom?

What would it look like to be truly free? On the one hand, there's political freedom, isn't there? I mean, who isn't roused by a movie like Braveheart?

As William Wallace, or at least Mel Gibson qua William Wallace, stands on a Scottish hillside declaring, They can take our land, but they cannot take our freedom! You feel yourself being stirred, do you not?

After all, aren't these our inalienable rights, according to the Declaration of Independence? Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? But even though these are moments in political history, the First Scottish War, Jefferson's Declaration, don't they point us to the fact that true freedom is something bigger than political freedom?

As important and invaluable as that in itself is. It seems so. Just a few weeks ago, the great feminist poet Adrienne Rich died at the age of 82.

[4 : 24] The New York Times wrote this about her. They said, That's another way to think of freedom, isn't it?

A society without domination, without oppression. Where individuals are free to be who they want to be. Where personal autonomy can be fully realized.

One thinks in this regard of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy's now infamous definition of liberty. Have you heard this before? At the heart of liberty, he says, is the right to define one's own concept of existence.

Of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. This, it seems for some, is true freedom.

The right to be completely self-determining in beliefs and actions. To dance the steps of one's own choosing to the music of one's own making across the accidental stage of our existence.

[5 : 51] But often in reality, this kind of freedom often becomes something much less romantic and courageous than it originally sounds.

Robert Bellah continues, Yet, what we mean by freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others. Not having other people's values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one.

Being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life. So is this what it looks like to be truly free? To simply be left alone?

Our longing for freedom, it turns out, is deeply problematic. But our text today tells us in no uncertain terms where true freedom is to be found.

Paul writes, For freedom, Christ has set you free. Christianity, you see, is a message of freedom.

[6 : 55] It's a liberation movement setting hearts and lives free. Of course, that's not how many people think of Christianity today.

It's often seen as just the opposite. It's seen as oppressive or stifling. A system of arbitrary rules and dogmas. A dusty old set of traditions and rituals. Of all things, who would want to become a Christian?

Right? Enlightenment thinker John Dr. Rousseau famously wrote, Man was born free, but is everywhere in chains. And some today think a large part of those chains is religion.

If we can just disabuse ourselves of religion and God, then we will recover our lost freedom. I ran across this quote this week from the secular humanist journal, Free Inquiry, that I think summed up this impulse pretty well.

They wrote, Some ideas can enslave you. Some can set you free. If you crave freedom from baseless dogma, if you want to think for yourself, instead of submitting to tradition, authority, or blind faith, put aside religion, despair, guilt, and sin, and find new meaning and joy in life.

[8 : 17] Put aside religion, and you will find freedom. That's a sentiment of many, is it not? And you know, in large part, believe it or not, Paul would actually agree.

Put aside religion, and you will find freedom. To a certain extent, that's what Galatians is all about. Throughout this letter, Paul's been trying to show that the gospel, the message about Jesus at the heart of Christianity, couldn't be more different than what we commonly call religion.

Religion leads to slavery, but the gospel brings freedom. And this freedom is the greatest freedom of all.

Because it's not just freedom from political oppression, it's not freedom from societal or cultural restraint, but freedom from the judgment of God, from the guilt of our sin, from the condemnation and curse of the law.

This freedom is the unrestricted liberty of approach to God as His children, and without fear.

[9 : 32] And if you have that freedom, you are truly free. This is what Paul's been building up to in the whole of Galatians. 5.1 is really the climax of the whole letter.

For four chapters, Paul's been explaining the gospel, and it's been like a wave surging and growing and picking up steam and rising higher and higher and like a wall of ocean heading for the shore.

Now it comes crashing home with this triumphant declaration for freedom. Christ has set us free.

Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

That's what the Galatians need to know and believe and live. They need to let the wave of the Christ-one freedom pick them up off their feet and sweep them into its liberating power.

And friends, that's what we need too. And to do that, I want to highlight three things in these verses. I want us to see first, that it's Christ who has set us free.

[10 : 43] And second, that it's for freedom that Christ has set us free. And third, we must stand firm in that freedom. There's the heads. Let's dive in. First, it's Christ who has set us free.

You see, before becoming Christians, the Galatians were good first century pagans. They worshiped idols. They lived immoral lives. And on the surface, you see, it looked like they enjoyed a tremendous amount of freedom.

Their beliefs were pluralistic and pragmatic. If someone wanted to introduce another God into the mix, no big deal. Bring them in. If they work, why not? And their ethic was highly permissive. If it felt good, do it. If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad. By modern standards, they would have seemed quite liberated. But in chapter 4, remember, Paul says that they weren't free at all. In fact, they were slaves. Without the true God ruling their life, they were enslaved to their passions and desires and false gods.

[11 : 51] You see, this is why that quote from Free Inquiry that I mentioned earlier was so close, but so far away. Remember, it said, put aside religion, despair, guilt, and sin, and find new meaning and joy in your life.

But when you put aside religion, what are you putting in its place? Where do you go to find that new meaning and joy in life?

Without God in the picture, whom or what will you grasp to set you free? Cultural anthropologist and Pulitzer Prize winner Ernest Becker famously argued that we'll find something to fill the gap left by God.

And often, that something he suggests is romantic love. Listen to what he writes. He says that when we've cast off God, the love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one's life.

All spiritual and moral needs now become focused in one individual. In one word, the love object is God. Man reached for a thou when the worldview of the great religious community overseen by God died.

[13 : 05] After all, what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to a position of God? We want redemption. Nothing less. You see, religion isn't an easy thing to just put aside.

Human beings incurably reach for a thou, Becker says. Or in the words of Jerry Maguire, we search for a lover constantly to whom we can say, you complete me.

But of course, another human being can't complete you. A love partner can't redeem you. To elevate romantic love to a position of God will only result in slavery.

You see, since you have to have it, you'll do anything for it. You'll be utterly driven to obtain it. You'll compromise yourself just to get it. And if something blocks it, you'll get angry.

And if something threatens it, you'll get afraid. If you fail to get it, you'll be filled with guilt and self-loathing. And of course, if you do get it, it doesn't fulfill.

[14 : 12] It doesn't set you free. So you move on to another lover and another. And you find that getting into a marriage won't set you free. And getting out of a marriage doesn't set you free.

You're utterly enslaved. So maybe you try another avenue altogether, but they don't work either. Work doesn't set you free. Getting that book published or that promotion secured, that doesn't set you free.

Getting into the inner circle of popularity or power, that doesn't set you free either. Retiring to coastal Maine. And it doesn't set you free.

We make any one of these things a God, but they end up being lords that cannot liberate. Yet there's one Lord who can.

The Lord Jesus Christ. He has come to fully and finally put aside religion, despair, guilt, and sin.

[15 : 17] And He does so not by denying the reality of these things, but by fully and finally dealing with them in our place. Though we chose to worship created things rather than the Creator and so incurred God's just and right judgment, Christ dies for our sins.

He's condemned for our guilt. He redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us on the cross. And when the Galatians heard this message of Christ crucified and they put their faith, that is their trust, in Him, and through trusting Him they were set free.

Free because by faith they were united to Christ, which meant that all their sin and guilt and death had been transferred to Him and all of Christ's righteousness and life and salvation had been transferred to them.

Do you remember the Dickens novel A Tale of Two Cities set during the French Revolution? At the end of the novel Charles Darnay, a French aristocrat is in prison waiting the guillotine.

But on the night before he's been put to death, Sidney Carton, an Englishman, comes to him. Now part of the storyline has been how these two guys look uncannily similar and how they fall in love with the same girl, but the girl ends up falling in love with Charles and they have a child, but now Charles is arrested and on the verge of being executed.

[16:52] But Sidney comes to him in prison and he comes to take his place. And Charles at first refuses so Sidney actually has him drugged and stolen away in a carriage.

And the next morning Sidney goes to the guillotine so that Charles with his family can go free and take his friend's place safe and away in England.

You see friends, Christ came to us in the prison and took our place on the cross and set us free so that we could occupy his place in his righteousness before God.

But whereas for Sidney the guillotine was the end, for Christ the cross was not the end. God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heaven.

You see, Charles could only trust Sidney for that one act of rescue. He might fall into trouble again and then there'd be no one left to free him. But we can trust the risen Christ for all eternity.

[17:58] There's nothing that can shake or steal our righteousness and life and freedom away because he always lives to intercede. Jesus himself said if the Son has set you free then you are free indeed.

Our consciences can be in peace with God. We can be unafraid of death and God's final judgment. That is genuine freedom. That is true liberty. Our slavery has been broken.

Christ is our liberator and to trust in him is the greatest emancipation a human could ever know.

That's the first point to highlight from verse 1.

Christ has set us free and not anything or anyone else. Second, it's for freedom that Christ has set us free. This is Paul's main point really in verse 1.

You see, Christ didn't liberate the Galatians from their slavery of idolatry only to thrust them headlong under the slavery of the law. Let me try to make this as clear as possible.

[19:04] This is the true gospel. Believe in Christ. You are completely then saved. And from that place because your heart has been transformed by God's grace, you obey.

That's what Paul was teaching the Galatians. But the false gospel is this. Believe in Jesus and try to keep God's law as best you can and then God will save you.

That was the message of the false teachers. Do you see the difference? Believe in Christ. You're saved. And then you obey. Believe in Christ.

You must also obey. Then you are saved. Do you see the difference? It makes all the difference in the world. And Paul says if you give in to that Jesus plus obedience message, you're submitting all over again to a yoke of slavery.

In the first century, Jews would talk about the law of Moses as a yoke. They'd call it the yoke of the commandments or even the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. So Paul, you see, is being somewhat ironic here. He's saying that if you're obeying the law as a means of justifying yourself, you've got nothing but a yoke of slavery.

[20:24] And note that Paul says you'd be submitting again to a yoke of slavery. The Galatians, you see, were enslaved in their former life as pagans, but to take up the law would be going back again into slavery.

Even though on the surface, on the outside, it would look totally the opposite. You see, for Paul, idolatry and immorality on the one hand and law keeping and moral behavior on the other are just two sides of the same coin.

On the one hand, you've got blatant licentiousness and idolatry and on the other, you've got meticulous obedience and good behavior and Paul says neither one is better than the other.

They're both slavery. Now, how can that be? Well, we've already said that trying to live without God leads to slavery because the non-gods that we choose to be the saviors of our life, they can't deliver and we simply remain separated from the true God who can.

But trying to earn one acceptance with God through works also leads to slavery because we're making our moral record the Savior in our life. We're depending on the idol of our own ethical performance to deliver us.

[21:40] So at the end of the day, the God we're actually hoping to save us ends up being ourselves. And that too is enslavement. So you see, Paul is trying to keep the Galatians from falling off the other side of the cliff as it were.

God had rescued them from the slavery of law denying but they were in danger of going headlong over the other side of the cliff into law relying. But Paul says we don't get liberated from license to be enslaved to the law.

It's for freedom that Christ has set us free. Christianity is a third way. It's freedom from both. Of course, that's not what many people hear when they hear the gospel today, is it?

Someone can hear about the grace and forgiveness of Christ and they can think what's being said is if you stop living in a moral life and start living a moral life then God will accept you.

You see, we're so ingrained to think that it's our performance that makes us right with God that we'll even hear the message of Christ and interpret it as a message of moral betterment.

[22 : 50] So when many people say they've become Christians, they've really just stepped into a moralistic grid and they try it out for a while and then they walk away from it thinking they tried the gospel and it just didn't work.

They thought Christianity was supposed to offer peace and freedom and it didn't. Well, the reality is what they were trying didn't work because they didn't have the gospel.

What they were trying was works righteousness, moral improvement, not true biblical Christianity.

So let me ask you this morning, friend, have you really heard the message of the gospel clearly?

It's not trust in Jesus, obey as best you can and then God perhaps will save you. Your obedience has nothing to do with it. That's the freedom Paul's talking about here.

Freedom to say that my obedience, my moral record has nothing to do with it. Think of the two major themes Paul has been emphasizing up to this point in the letter.

[24 : 07] On the one hand, justification, being declared right with God. And what does Paul say? Your obedience has nothing to do with it.

This week, if you had a great week, if you knocked it out of the park ethically, God's verdict over you hasn't changed. And if you had a terrible week, if you blew it, if this was maybe the worst week you've had in a long time, in Christ, God's verdict over you hasn't changed.

Next, think about adoption, that other great theme that Paul has been weaving through this letter. Being accepted as a son or daughter of God the Father. Again, your obedience has nothing to do with it.

If you had an hour-long quiet time every day this week, if you fasted three times, if you attended not one, but two all-night prayer vigils, nothing has changed in God's favor towards you.

God doesn't love you more for those things. Or maybe the opposite is true for you. Maybe you didn't crack a Bible open once this week. Maybe you snapped at your family.

[25 : 25] Maybe you blew it at work. Maybe you did all sorts of things you shouldn't have done. But even so, in Christ, God loves you the same as if you had or hadn't done those things.

You see, your obedience has nothing to do with it. Why? Not because God is a permissive, doting grandfather. Not because God doesn't have moral standards.

Not at all. God hates sin and delights in righteousness. The reason your obedience has nothing to do with it is because of Christ's obedience.

He completely filled the law. He perfectly pleased the Father. And when the Father looks at His Son, He looks without an ounce of love reserved.

And if you are in Christ through faith, then God sees you in the Son without an ounce of His love reserved.

[26 : 24] And your obedience can't possibly add or detract from His. My family is from central Pennsylvania. And most of my relatives on my mom's side worked for Bethlehem Steel, another company that is no longer in existence.

It's gone the way of AOL, but long before AOL went the way of AOL. Bethlehem Steel, at the heart of a steel mill, is a furnace. And some of these furnaces burn at over 3,000 to 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

If you were to look into one of those furnaces, the only thing you would see is a blaze of yellow energy. Apparently, the guys who worked on the floor used to joke with my stepdad who was a foreman, hey, if you ever need anyone to disappear, just let us know.

Now, imagine you're standing before that 4,000 degree furnace, staring into light so bright and thick that it looks like a ball of liquid. Keep in mind, this thing melts iron.

It could make a human person disappear. And now, imagine you take a match from your pocket and you strike it and you throw it in.

[27 : 48] What do you notice? Nothing. That's what you notice. Your match didn't make the flame one bit brighter or one bit dimmer, one bit hotter or one bit colder.

Take your whole matchbook and throw it in. It won't make a difference. The continuous, uninterrupted blaze of that furnace is all you will see.

You see, it's the same when by faith you step into the fire of Christ's righteousness. The matches of your moral behavior don't change the blaze one bit.

And when the Father looks at you, He sees you engulfed in the radiance of His Son. And His love for you is unchanging as the blaze that surrounds you.

What could you do to heighten or lessen that fire? What could you do to add or subtract from the glory of such a king? Not one thing.

[28 : 59] And that, friends, is why Christianity is a message of freedom. The chains of your slavery to sin and law are melted in the fire of Christ's righteousness because you are His and He is yours simply and solely by faith.

Our third and last point then is this. We must stand firm in that freedom. It's easy to slide into slavery so we have to stand firm, Paul says.

We must be on our guard. You can't glide through life thinking that Christian freedom is easy to maintain. Paul's exhortation here is enough to warn us against thinking so.

Even though the first half of this verse is emphatic and triumphant, the second half of this verse shows us that freedom can easily slip from our grasp. The word for standing fast here is a military term.

It means to stick together, to keep alert, to resist attack, to be strong. And I want to suggest to you this morning that our firm footing upon the freedom we have in Christ can be unsettled from both of these directions that we've been talking about.

[30 : 17] From the side of license and from the side of the law. You see, from the side of license there will always be the attack, always the critique that Christianity and Christian freedom makes too much of God's holiness.

All that talk of sin and wrath and judgment. G.K. Chesterton once observed that Christianity's outer ring is dark enough with its grave view of sin and judgment and hell.

But it's in a ring, he said. There you will find the old human life, dancing like children and drinking wine like men.

For Christianity is the only frame for the old pagan freedom. But in the modern philosophy, the case is opposite, he continues.

Its outer ring is that of one obviously artistic and emancipated. Its despair is within.

[31 : 25] You see, we stand firm by remembering that the kind of freedom available apart from Christianity is at best just a superficial parody of what the gospel offers.

On the outside, it might look like emancipation, but on the inside, it's despair. And we also acknowledge that these realities of sin and judgment and death, the harsh realities of our human condition before God have been conquered by Christ for all who believe.

Such that in Him we can dance and we can drink as truly free people. So we must stand firm against the slavery of license.

Only in Christ will you have the rich freedom that your soul was made for. But there's a danger from the other side. You see, from the side of the law, there will always be the attack that Christianity makes too much of God's love, too much of God's mercy.

Surely it says obedience must count for something. It can't just be solely grace, can it? What will motivate holy living? What will keep us from doing whatever we please?

[32 : 43] Now those are good questions. And there are good answers to those questions. And we'll come to them in due course in chapters 5 and 6 in Galatians. But for now, Paul is telling us, stand firm.

And we can stand firm here against the slavery of the law by asking, what is it that makes the law so appealing? Well, I think it's because we think the law can do at least three things for us.

We think it can grant us righteousness. We think it can bring us favor or sonship with God. And we think that the law can provide life change and make us better people.

And aren't those the three things that Paul has been stressing throughout Galatians. Justification, adoption, spirit-given transformation. You see, the Galatian teachers were making false promises based on a false understanding of the law.

The law could never do any of those things. So in order to stand firm and not submit, we must always remind ourselves that our righteousness and our adoption and our transformation are found in Christ and in Christ alone.

[33 : 57] Only in Him are we counted righteous. Only in Him are we adopted as daughters and sons. God's spirit filling our hearts to cry, Abba, Father. And only in Him do we become a new creation with transformed motivation so as to walk and live and keep in step with the Spirit.

So stand firm, Christian. And as God's holiness and love are questioned and as your freedom, whether from your own conscience or from those around you, is put under criticism, realize that it is ultimately only in Him that we stand firm.

It's in Him. We come to Christ and to the cross where God's holiness and love are both displayed in all their fullness. God's holiness in requiring such a penalty for our sins and God's love in paying that penalty through His own Son.

The cross is our freedom. It's there you can be set free and it's there that you stand firm in it. Let's pray.

Father, we praise You that in Christ we have a great liberator who sets our hearts free. Holy Spirit, help us to stand firm in this freedom and not to submit again to a yoke of slavery.

[35 : 33] In Christ's name we pray. Amen.