

Freedom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 March 2026

Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0:00] Well, good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Would you turn with me to Galatians chapter 5, verses 1 through 15.

! That's page 915 in the Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there. So today we've come to a new section of Galatians. This book of Galatians roughly falls into three parts. The first two chapters, as you'll remember, were mostly Paul's autobiography.

The next two chapters, three and four, were mostly theology and biblical exegesis. And today we begin the last two chapters, chapters 5 and 6, which are mostly about ethics, that is how to live. How do we live?

So let me pray as we come to God's Word, and then I'll read for us. Father, our minds and our hearts are so often distracted and burdened by many things, cares of life, concerns of the weak. God, thank you that you are present with us in each one of those cares and concerns. We ask now that as we come to your Word, you would give us clear minds and hearts to hear from you.

[1:32] Lord, help the words that you have inspired and that you continue to speak through, speak to our hearts today, that we might see and know Christ and His grace more fully.

We pray this in His name. Amen. All right, Galatians 5, 1 through 15. 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.

[2:47] You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. For you were called to freedom, brothers.

Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. All right. So what Paul wants to drive home in this passage is that Christianity, a life in Christ, is above all a life of freedom.

[4:04] For freedom, Christ has set us free. And what is that freedom? Well, that's what Paul's been arguing for really the whole book up until this point. And it's the greatest freedom of all, freedom of acceptance with God and of access to God through Christ by grace.

It's freedom from the tyranny of the law. That is, freedom from the dreadful struggle to keep the law as a way to win the favor of God. In other words, it's the freedom of grace.

And in many ways, chapter 5, verse 1, is sort of the rhetorical climax of the whole letter. Galatians is the letter of Christian freedom. There's no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

We no longer need to look to the law or at our efforts at keeping the law as the ground of our standing before God. Now, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Though we are still sinners, yes, we are now completely justified. That is, God counts us as perfectly righteous in His sight, in Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

[5:17] So, we ask ourselves this morning, do we, do you know this freedom? Well, if you are in Christ, then you do know it.

You are a partaker of this grace. Your sins are forgiven. You're righteous in God's eyes, and He has adopted you and made you an heir of His kingdom. You are His beloved. And the journey of the Christian life, then, is now a journey to live in the freedom of this grace.

To live as those who are no longer under the condemnation of the law. To live as those who have been justified in the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself for us.

But, there are two pitfalls that Paul needs to address as he begins to unfold what living this life of freedom means.

It's as if we've been carried up by grace to the ridge of a high mountain. And along that ridge is the path of freedom, the path of God's grace in Christ.

[6:33] And to walk along that ridge is to take in all the beauty and the joy that comes from being high up and seeing the landscape spread before you in all directions. The sun rising to the east, the ocean waves crashing in the distance, the stars just beginning to fade in the morning light, the fresh air in your lungs, the firm ground beneath your feet.

This is the path of freedom. freedom. But just like a mountain ridge has two slopes that fall away on either side, so the life of Christian freedom has two opposite pitfalls on either side.

As we walk along the path of God's liberating grace, there are two equal and opposite ways that we can slide or fall off. And that's what these verses that we just read describe for us.

On the one hand, Paul says, stand firm in the freedom of Christ and don't lose it. And on the other side, Paul says, stand firm in the freedom of Christ and don't abuse it.

Two sides, two pitfalls along the path of Christian freedom. We can lose it by falling back into the legalism and works righteousness. And we can abuse it by giving way to license and our old sinful nature.

[7:59] And in light of both, we must stand firm. So let's look at these two pitfalls so that we can stand firm in the freedom for which Christ has set us free. First, Paul says, don't lose your freedom by giving way to legalism.

Paul argues this in verses 2 through 12. And in many ways, this has been the argument pretty much of the whole book of Galatians so far, hasn't it? But notice that these two paragraphs in verses 2 through 12, notice that these two paragraphs show us that there are kind of two ways that we can be tempted or two reasons why we can be tempted to kind of go back to that old mentality of works righteousness.

The first one is this. We're tempted to go back into legalism because it promises something that we can see and control here and now. Now, as Paul begins in verses 2 through 6, he begins by saying that you kind of can't have it both ways.

You can't go to the law or to law-keeping as your means of acceptance with God because then you inevitably go away from Christ. And it's not just the Old Testament law.

It could really be anything. Anything you put your trust in other than Christ, whether it's moral living or whether it's justice work or whether it's family values or your culture or your upbringing, it's no different.

[9:19] The further you move toward trusting your own ability and achievements as your identity, as your righteousness, the further you move away from Christ. It's sort of like taking a cross-country road trip, right?

The closer you get to L.A., the further away you get from Boston, right? Unless you're starting in Maine, then you actually have to go through both. But that's, you know, you get the illustration, right?

There's no way you can drive towards both. That's why Paul says that the more and more you start relying on your own doings, the more and more you've fallen away from this freedom of grace.

Grace and works are opposite. Grace is God giving freely to you something that you don't deserve out of His own mercy. But if you try to earn God's favor by your performance, then by definition it's not grace.

You're not trusting Christ to save you, you're trusting in yourself to save you. But why? Why is it so easy to fall off on this side of the ridge?

[10:23] Why is it so easy to go back to trusting in our own selves and our own works and thinking that those are the things that we have to keep up and maintain in order to stay in a right standing with God?

I think one reason is because those things that we usually cling to or hold on to are very easy to see. They're tangible. You know, I can count how often I had a quiet time this week.

I can see how much money I gave to charity. I can sort of, I can say who I voted for or what causes I support. But what's more, those things aren't just tangible. people, we can control them.

They're in our grasp. We can be the ones who do it. You see, it's not about whether you are circumcised and it's not about whether you are uncircumcised.

It's not about your religious pedigree and performance, you see. You see, your religious pedigree and performance or your lack of religious pedigree or performance, they count for nothing.

[11:29] There's only one thing that counts, faith in Christ, faith that is energized in love. And at its heart, faith isn't about controlling something.

It's about trusting something or rather trusting someone. It's about actually giving over control of your life to another. And that sort of faith, when placed in Christ Jesus, will begin expressing itself in love, Paul says.

Now, why is that? Well, because this faith looks ahead to the future with eager expectation. That's what verse 5 is all about. You know, the legalistic mindset, our works, righteousness mindset says, look at yourself and look at what you've done or not done.

And then maybe, just maybe, you'll be okay in the future. But faith in Christ says, I know that my Redeemer lives and I will stand with Him on that day.

I eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. It's not a scale that might tip one way or the other, but it's assurance.

[12:46] Now, what is this hope of righteousness? Well, this hope of righteousness is the righteous verdict of God that awaits those who are in Christ through faith.

God's declaration that in Christ we are righteous and approved, a righteous verdict that overturns and undoes all the ravages of sin in the fall.

And this hope of righteousness is the time when God's righteousness prevails. When those in Christ will be given resurrection bodies and death will be no more.

When the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and all things will be made new and will be glorified in the presence of God forever. Don't you look at the broken world and at times your own broken self and wonder, is it ever going to be made right?

Will all that's sad ever eventually come untrue? And the answer is yes. the God of the Bible, the Creator and Redeemer has promised His people great hope, the hope of His righteousness that all things will be put right.

[14:14] And for those who are in Christ, you can have the assurance where you will stand when God's righteousness judges sin and evil and makes all things new.

You can have the assurance that you will be counted righteous on that day even though in our own sins that's not what we deserve. And why can we have that assurance?

Why can we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness not anxiously wonder how things are going to turn out? How can we have that assurance? Because we've done something good or moral or just with our lives?

Because we've obeyed and worked and labored and kept God's law? No! Because Christ did. And our trust is Him, not ourselves.

We've actually given up trusting in our own record and trust only in His. So legalism can be tempting because it feels like something we can control.

[15:18] Oh, but the freedom of grace is so much better. It's entrusting ourselves to another, giving control to another, and that brings great assurance, the hope of righteousness.

But you know, there's a second reason why legalism can be so tempting, so easy to fall back into, even for Christians. And we see this in verses 7 through 12.

Not only is legalism tempting because it offers us something we can see and control for ourselves, but legalism is tempting because it removes the scandal.

It removes the offense of the cross. Now, in this paragraph, Paul is kind of calling out the false teachers in Galatia. You know, he's not afraid to say that what they are teaching is not from God. This persuasion is not from Him who calls you, he says to the Galatians. That is, it's not from God the Father who's called you by His grace to Himself through the gospel. These false teachers, he says, you were running well.

[16:18] They've cut in on you, he says, and they've kept you from obeying the truth. And their teaching is like leaven in a dump of dough, in a lump of dough.

It's just going to spread and leak into everything. You know, have you considered, friends, that you can't have just like a little bit of legalism, right?

It's not just like you can have like a plate full of grace and then like a garnish of legalism, right? And just be happy with it there. No, it starts to spread, right? It starts to spread through everything because suddenly, if it's not Christ that makes you right with God, but something you have to add to it, right?

Then when does it stop? Suddenly, it's not just Christ, but it's also how often you pray. It's also how many people you've served. It's also how faithful you've been. It's all the things that you refrain from doing.

It's not about how faithful Christ has been. And Paul is so passionate to protect the churches and the Christians that he loves from this freedom-killing false teaching that he even says in verse 12, I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves.

[17:40] Now, how many of you thought you'd find a verse like that in the Bible, right? Now, at first, that seems like a pretty crude thing to say, right?

I mean, I mean, has Paul just kind of lost it here? Like, has he lost his temper? Did his sort of rhetoric just go a little too far? I mean, what is going on in this verse, right? Well, I think it's helpful to consider that in the ancient world, the priests of pagan temples would often be eunuchs.

And Paul in this letter has often said that their breed, this brand of legalism, is actually no better than paganism. In fact, they're kind of at root the same thing.

Whether you're super, super, super religious and you think that makes you right with God or you're totally irreligious and you don't know up from down, they're both slavery, Paul says.

So, Paul has said often in this letter that legalism is no better than paganism. So, perhaps here, Paul isn't just sort of spiting his opponents. Perhaps he's saying, I wish those people who say that they're teaching God's law would just show themselves for what they truly are, proponents of a false religion altogether, just like the priests at the pagan temples.

[19:14] Now, of course, Paul's using deep verbal irony and wordplay, isn't he? It's risky, isn't it? It's a bit of tension grabbing, no doubt. But I don't think he's making a personal jab or a crude put-down.

I think he's actually making a theological point. If you make law-keeping your salvation, you're worshipping a false God, not the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Because what does this God say is the way of salvation? The true God, the God revealed in Jesus. What does God say is the way of salvation? Not human achievement, but the humiliation of Christ on a Roman cross.

Look again at verse 11. He says, but if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed.

Apparently, some people accused Paul of being a people-pleaser, and they claimed that he would adjust his message according to the audience so that, you know, if he was in a place where circumcision was offensive, well, he would just leave that out.

[20:28] But then, when he was in other contexts, he would kind of teach the whole thing. So Paul was perhaps accused of doing, but Paul here just completely rejects this accusation completely.

Paul didn't preach circumcision as a means of salvation ever. He preached the cross of Christ. And in light of the cross, circumcision was rendered meaningless.

In fact, all human achievements, all human works, all human contributions to put ourselves in the right with God are shown by the cross to be utterly insufficient to save.

nothing a human being can do, not even their most earnest efforts at keeping the very law of God can save them.

That is the scandal. That is the offense. That is the stumbling block of the cross. In other words, your sins are so great that the Son of God had to die in your place, even if you are the most upright, moral, religious person in the world.

[21:54] Do you want to know how great your righteousness is, Paul tells us? Look at the cross and see the crucifixion of your so-called righteousness and see the crucifixion of your pride.

You see, legalism appeals to our pride, doesn't it? It says, look, you can elevate yourself to God. You can do it. But the gospel necessarily makes us humble.

It doesn't say you can elevate yourself to God. It says, God had to come down and suffer and die to cover our great sins in order to turn away the great wrath that we justly deserved.

See, legalism is very tempting because it removes that offense of the cross. But when we embrace the offense of the cross, you see, when we come to embrace the scandal of it, when we see that our pride and our self-made righteousness actually is nailed to the cross, something else happens. We aren't just brought low, we're brought near. For the cross tells us not just that our sins were so great that God had to die for us, but the cross also tells us that we are so loved by God that He was willing and glad to die for us.

[23:30] We live by faith in the crucified and risen Son of God, as Paul says, who loved me and gave Himself for me. You see, when you trade legalism for grace, when you kneel before the cross and trust in the crucified, you aren't just humbled out of your pride, but you're loved, you're filled with a new kind of boldness and confidence.

You aren't just brought low, you're brought near into an embrace that will never let you go. So stand firm, Paul says to us. Stand firm in this freedom and don't submit to a yoke of slavery, this heavy burden of thinking you have to add something to what Christ has already done for your salvation. Stand firm by fixing your eyes on the cross. Now, how do we do that? Well, we do that through regular practices of prayerful reading and hearing of Scripture, through celebrating the Lord's Supper, receiving the broken bread and the cup.

We do so when we hear God's Word preached. We do so through prayer. We have all these channels to be able to continue to fix our eyes on the grace of Christ displayed on the cross. But we also stand firm by eagerly looking ahead to the hope of righteousness. Christ is risen from the dead. Christian hope is not wishful thinking but confident expectation.

[24:58] So we meditate and we sing and we pray and we reflect and we remember that God will complete the good work that He began and He'll make all things new. That Christ's resurrection was the first fruits of the renewal to come.

The guarantee that He will conquer sin and death once for all and all those who belong to Him will be raised with Him. That one day the verdict that was enacted in Jesus' own resurrection proclaiming that He was righteous will one day be granted to us as well if we are in Him and God will say on the last day this is my beloved son this is my beloved daughter you in whom I'm well pleased.

So that's all one side of the ridge right? We can lose sight of our freedom in the pitfall of legalism legalism that promises control and puffs up our pride.

But there's an opposite side as well there's the equal danger that we can abuse our freedom in the pitfall of license. When we stumble off this edge we allow the freedom of grace to become an excuse for sin.

Listen again to how Paul puts it in verses 13-15 he says for you were called to freedom brothers only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but through love serve one another for the whole law is fulfilled in one word you shall love your neighbor as yourself but if you bite and devour one another watch out that you're not consumed by one another.

[26:33] You see the freedom of God's grace doesn't mean that we're no longer doesn't mean that we no longer care about living holy lives in obedience to God's word. It's actually just the opposite.

God's grace empowers us to live holy lives in a way that the law never could. Why? Because the law just says do this and don't do this it doesn't give you any power to actually follow through but those who are in Christ through faith are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

The third person of the Trinity very God himself lives within believers and enables them in a way we could never before to now love God and enjoy God and obey God in a way the law never could prompt us to do.

But this freedom of grace it can be misused, right? Paul says don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Now the flesh is sort of a technical word for Paul.

It doesn't mean your physical body like your flesh and bones as we say. No, when Paul says your flesh he's referring to our old sinful human nature that we inherited from Adam.

[27:47] This old sinful nature that still exists in believers even though we've been regenerated even though we've been given new life by the Spirit through the gospel. You see in Christ you are a new person a new birth has occurred your true self in Christ is now alive but in this age your old self your flesh still dwells in you and as we'll see next week the desires of the Spirit in us and the desires of the flesh in us are constantly opposed to one another constantly in conflict in this life.

This is why believers often feel a battle with sinful desires because our old self is still hanging on in this fallen world but the Spirit in us is finally putting up a fight with this old nature that loves sin right?

This is why when some people become Christians they finally realize that there's this huge turmoil going on. Why? Because before they didn't care if they sinned it was just what they did now the Spirit's in them and they're like holy moly what's going on inside of me?

Well the desires of the Spirit are opposed to the desires of your flesh so if you're feeling conviction over sin that's a good thing that's the Spirit in you at work but Paul's point here is that this freedom of grace this freedom that you've been loved accepted justified in Christ holy by grace apart from your works it doesn't mean that we should give our old sinful natures an opportunity to go on sinning.

That word opportunity is actually kind of like a military word it means something like a foothold or a base of operations you know like a beachhead. In other words Paul's saying that the freedom of grace doesn't mean we should allow our old sinful habits and patterns to set up a camp in the middle of our lives.

[29:38] We shouldn't say because I'm saved by grace I can now indulge my sinful habits. No that's not what Christ set us free for. He set us free not for the flesh he set us free for love.

Through the Spirit we can actually say no to sinful desires. We can say no to sinful desires that really just want to use other people right? And instead we can use this freedom we have of grace to now serve other people through love.

We don't need to use other people we can serve them in love. And here's the wonderful thing. When by the Spirit and the freedom of grace we serve one another through love we actually fulfill the law.

Verse 14 for the whole law is fulfilled in one word you should love your neighbors yourself. Here's the beautiful thing when we stop trying to earn our salvation by keeping the law and when we trust in Christ alone for our righteous standing before God then we're actually freed up to begin fulfilling the law in love.

Now do those acts of love contribute to our justification in some way? No! Christ's righteousness doesn't need any supplement from you. Right? It's not like you eat a big plate of Jesus and then you need a multivitamin to fill it out.

[31:14] Right? No! His righteousness is complete and whole and it's yours through faith. But you see this is just the thing.

The law was never meant to be a tool for saving ourselves. The false teachers at Galatia weren't just confused about what time they were at in redemptive history.

Now that Christ had come the law had passed. They didn't really understand the law at all in the first place. The law was never meant to be a tool for saving ourselves.

It was meant to be a pointer to Christ and through Christ it was meant to then show us the path of how to truly love and freedom. Through the freedom of grace we actually run in the path of God's commands not out of fear that God might reject us but out of grateful love for the God who has accepted us by His grace and whose commands now show us how life was always meant to be lived.

The life of love lived according to God's commands is the truly good life. Your holiness and your happiness are the same thing.

[32:37] And the Spirit in us not only helps us to see and understand those commands as good but He also continues to make the love of Christ real in our hearts.

The Spirit testifies to our spirit that we are God's children. We call out Abba Father. We enjoy God's embrace and love and then in the communion of His love we go forth into the world as people of love.

Christians should be the last people in the world to love sin. How could we love the very thing that sent Christ the lover of our souls to the cross?

How could we give any foothold to the old nature that steals our life and joy? As Paul says at the end of our passage, if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you're not consumed by one another.

You see, the opposite of true holiness is not fun and happiness. The opposite of real holiness in Christ, fueled by the joy and love of Christ, the opposite of that isn't fun and happiness.

[33:56] It's cannibalism. It's death. Sin wants us to use each other for our own pleasure, to bite and devour, but in the end, that's the path of sorrow.

We are consumed. So, Christian, stand firm. Christ has set you free, not so that you can indulge your flesh, but so that you can walk in love, not so you can reject God's commands, but so that you can finally fulfill them.

In Christ, we've been set free. how will we live in this freedom? Brothers and sisters, let's stay on that high mountain ridge.

Let's walk and stand firm in the path of the grace of God. This is the way, not of legalism, not of license and indulging the flesh, it's the way of love.

love demonstrated above all by Christ. This is why you've been set free, to live a life of love to the glory of Christ, where it's not circumcision that matters, it's not uncircumcision that matters, but faith in the Son of God that matters, faith expressing itself in love, and where with eager expectation and with certain hope we look ahead to where this path ultimately leads, the hope of righteousness, when the glory of God covers the earth like the waters cover the sea, when we rise with Christ in the new heavens and new earth, where there's no more sickness or sorrow, there's no more sin and no more death, a world where there's only love, a love that goes on for eternity and gets richer and richer, wave upon wave, world without end.

[36:01] Friends, AI is not the future. Love is the future, the love of Christ. That's what you've been set free for, so stand firm.

Let's pray. pray. Holy Spirit, through you, by the gift of faith that you've given us, we, whom you've caused to be born again, we, whom you've united to Christ, oh, how we eagerly look forward to this hope of righteousness.

Thank you, Father, that we, as your children, can be people of hope and therefore people of love. love. Lord, renew in us a conviction that walking in the paths of holy love really is our deepest joy, because it is the place where you are.

So, God, keep us, keep us from the mindset that would tell us, those voices that would whisper in our ear telling us we're not good enough. love. Oh, Lord, help us to turn our eyes to the crucified Christ and see the great love that you've loved us.

And, Lord, when the old nature would whisper in our ears and promise us life along its paths of death, help us to say, no, we belong to another now. We are people of the Spirit.

[37:41] Move among us, Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.