

“Freedom”

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Galatians 5:1-15 (ESV)

¹ *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

² *Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.* ³ *I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.* ⁴ *You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.* ⁵ *For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.* ⁶ *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*

⁷ *You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?* ⁸ *This persuasion is not from him who calls you.* ⁹ *A little leaven leavens the whole lump.* ¹⁰ *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.* ¹¹ *But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.* ¹² *I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!*

¹³ *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.* ¹⁴ *For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* ¹⁵ *But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*¹

We talk a lot about freedom in this country, but I’m not sure we understand what freedom is. A lot of Americans think of freedom as being free from any restraint and any obligations.

But freedom from restraint is only part of freedom. We can be free from something—tyranny, rules, or whatever you think is holding you down. But we should also be free in order to do something else. That’s an important idea. Negative freedom is freedom *from* something. Positive freedom is freedom *to* or *for* something else. Let me give you a positive example: In Christianity, we are free from our sin. We are free from idolatry. But we are not absolutely free. We are freed from those things so we can serve God. We become free from sin so we can be slaves to righteousness, as the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 6 (see vv. 16-22). If you’re tangled up in something sinful, that thing is your master and your lord, not Jesus. But if Jesus is your Master and Lord, then you can be freed from your sin. But you can’t have it both ways.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Let me give you another example, a negative one: some people self-medicate in order to escape from their problems. So they turn to drugs or they abuse alcohol, and for a while they feel good and don't worry about their problems. During that time, they feel free. They're free from worry. But what are they free to, or free for? They're free to have mental health issues. They're free to lose their jobs. They're free to have broken relationships. But they're not free to have a flourishing life.

My point is not to pick on people who have substance abuse problems. My point is that we are not absolutely free. We can't do whatever we want. That's because we're finite creatures. We have limitations. Freedom in one area of life entails a loss of freedom in other areas of life. That's just the way it is. I could use all kinds of examples. The woman who wants to be free to have a career and a family isn't free to do both things well. A great pianist must be a slave to practice—chained to the piano bench, as it were—in order to be free to play what he or she wants on the keyboard.

Real freedom comes at a cost, and it must be used to do something good. Os Guinness, a Christian writer, says that “Freedom is not the permission to do what we like but the power to do what we should.”² That idea is so important for all of life. It's important for politics. It's important for the way we think about our personal freedom and also our obligations—to our society, to our coworkers and neighbors, and to our family and friends. And it's very important to how we think about our relationship with God.

In the book of Galatians, Paul says that we can be slaves to a system of self salvation, or we can be slaves of love—love for God and love for each other. On the one hand, if we are slaves of some method of trying to save ourselves—whether we follow a system of laws or whether we follow our hearts—we aren't free to be Christians. We're not free to trust Jesus for our salvation. We're not free to be God's children and receive everything that comes with that relationship.

On the other hand, if we are freed from our sin and our selfishness by Jesus, we aren't free to do just anything we want. We are free to love God and love others. We're free to obey God because we love him and we're thankful that he saved us. But if we're going to be freed from our sin, we must be slaves to righteousness, and even each other. We'll see that in this passage.

² Os Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 152.

So, let's look at verse 1: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Last week, we talked about slavery. People who try to obey the law of the Old Testament—or any other set of rules—are slaves. They are bound by those rules, and they are bound by their own performance. Why is that slavery? Because if people rely on their own performance in order to be part of a group—whether it's a religious group, or a social group, or anything else—if they follow the rules, they become very proud. But if they fail, if they don't follow the rules, then they despair. So everything is riding on their performance. And whether someone is arrogant or wallowing in self-pity, that person isn't really free to love others.

It's easy to think about all of this in religious terms. We have all met very proud religious people—people who are self-righteous. And we have all met very guilty religious people—people who feel like failures because they didn't follow the rules. But this kind of mentality applies to non-religious people, too. A lot of people who are very secular, who don't claim to have any religion, still follow certain rules. In order to be part of the enlightened, progressive crowd, they have to have the right doctrines—the right beliefs. They have to have certain views on politics and the environment. And they have to have certain behaviors. They have to vote a certain way. There are political correct things they must say, and other things they cannot say. Every group has its own doctrines, its own rites, its own set of prophets, its own list of forbidden behaviors.

Actually, I think everyone tends to be religious. We all have a god, something that we think is of ultimate worth, or something that we think is an ultimate authority. Some people think money is the most important thing. If those people are making money—if they are following the rules of money, so to speak—they feel proud. And if they lose money—through a bad investment, for example—they feel crushed. The same is true whether the god is a relationship, or power, or sex, or popularity, or anything else. If we think we have to rely on our performance to please our god, or to attain our god, we'll always be slaves. So all of this is incredibly relevant.

In the case of the Galatians, they were being taught by some false teachers—and not by the apostle Paul—that in order to be acceptable to God—to be declared righteous or "in the right"—they had to believe in Jesus and obey the Old Testament law. Some Jewish teachers

referred to the law as a yoke³—if you wanted to be a Jew, a person of God, you had to submit to the law, which was a gift from God. But the law was a burden, because no one could fully obey it. That’s what the New Testament teaches. Consider the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. Peter and Paul had been preaching to Gentiles and many were repenting of their sin and putting their trust in Jesus. However, some men were saying, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (v. 1). So, a number of apostles and elders met in Jerusalem to discuss the issue. And this is what Peter said (in Acts 15:7-11):

⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Peter realized that no one could bear the yoke of the Old Testament law—no one but Jesus, of course. And Jesus didn’t ask for his followers to put on that yoke. Instead, Jesus said, in Matthew 11:28-30, “²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

However, the false teachers in Galatia denied this message. They said that in order to be a Christian, you had to come under the yoke of the law and have faith in Jesus. But Paul called the law a yoke of slavery. The fact is, if the Galatians wanted to trust in the law, they had to obey all the law and obey it perfectly. And they couldn’t do it; no one can do that. No one but Jesus. He was the only one who lived a perfectly righteous life. And if someone tries to obey the law in order to be righteous, and if they fail, which they will, they will receive the penalty or the curse for their failure, which is death.

The good news is that Jesus took that curse on himself when he died on the cross. So everyone who trusts in him has the curse taken from them, and they are credited with his righteousness. When God looks at Christians, it’s as if he’s looking at Christ. He regards us as

³ See Sanhedrin 94b in the Babylonian Talmud, < http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_94.html>, accessed August 22, 2015.

perfect—as if we never sinned and as if we did everything right—because we are united to Christ.

To insist on adding the law to Jesus’ perfect work on the cross is to deny what Jesus did and cut ourselves off from him. That’s what Paul is saying in verses 2-4:

² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

One of the key issues that the false teachers pressed was circumcision. If a man wanted to become Jewish, they had to be circumcised. After all, Abraham and all his male descendants were circumcised. I suppose the false teachers said to the Galatians, “If you want to be a child of Abraham, you’ll need to get circumcised.” And Gentiles in that day wouldn’t have been circumcised. This would have been a painful procedure and it would have put them at odds with other Gentiles. According to John Polhill, “Greeks and Romans neither understood nor appreciated Jewish circumcision. They considered it a defacing of the human body.”⁴ It’s likely that the Galatian men were considering getting circumcised because the false teachers were insisting on it.

But Paul says that if the Galatians thought that circumcision would get them into the people of God, then they would be severed from Christ. Why? Because they would be trusting not completely in Christ, but in Christ and in their own actions. And if they got circumcised, it would show they didn’t understand what Jesus had accomplished in dying on the cross and rising from the grave.

Even in the Old Testament, physical circumcision pointed to a greater reality, which is often called a circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4). The removal of a bit of flesh foreshadowed a greater reality: to be part of God’s people, our old selves have to go. Our old, calloused, dead hearts need to be replaced with new hearts, ones that can love and obey God (Ezek. 36:26-27). In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he says of Jesus, “¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised

⁴ John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1999), 25. On the same page, Polhill writes, “Some Jewish males who wanted to participate in the nude Greek athletic events tried to ‘undo’ their circumcision by undergoing a painful operation.”

with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11-12). What that means is that Jesus gives his people new hearts and new life when they enter into a relationship with him. Paul also says, in Philippians 3, that Christians “are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (v. 3). The real circumcision is the new life that comes from having the Holy Spirit, who causes us to be born again. When we have the power of God at work within us, we are God’s people. This becomes our new identity.

So to trust in circumcision is to miss all of this. There’s nothing wrong with being circumcised. But what’s wrong is trusting that circumcision has anything to do with membership in God’s people or salvation. If someone insists on this, then they must obey all of the law, which is impossible. We covered that when we looked at the beginning of Galatians 3. If someone insists on adding their efforts to what Jesus has done on the cross, it really shows that they don’t trust Jesus.

Let me give you another illustration: imagine you’re in an airport, about to board a plane. You happen to meet the pilot of the plane and you say, “Do you mind if I fly the plane?” He, being a sensible man, says, “No. You’re not qualified. You can’t do it.” Then you try to negotiate and you say, “Okay, what if I let you do the takeoff and the landing, and I control the plane in between?” Then he says, “No, I can’t let you do it. I have to fly from start to finish. I’m the only one here who’s able.” But you keep pressing. “What if I fly the plane for just a minute?” Then he looks you right in the eye and asks, “Don’t you trust me to fly the plane?”

The point is: we can’t earn our righteousness. Not at all. There’s nothing we can do to contribute to it. According to Isaiah 64:6, our best deeds are like a “polluted garment” (ESV) or “filthy rags” (NIV).⁵ How could these things ever add to what Jesus has done for us? One of the issues with the Catholic Church is that they state that certain things beyond repentance and faith are necessary for salvation. They say the sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony—are necessary for salvation.⁶ So

⁵ Either translation doesn’t capture what the passage is really saying: our righteous deeds are like a soiled menstrual garment.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 1129, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 292. This doctrine comes from the Council of Trent (1547). See also CCC 1256-57, 1277 with respect to baptism.

is observance of the natural law, which is defined by the Catholic Church.⁷ But the only thing that saves a person is being united to Jesus. And that involves involve repentance and faith. It usually will result in baptism and living according to God's law. But none of these other things save. Anyone can be dunked in water. Anyone can take the elements of the Lord's Supper. Anyone can tell a priest they've sinned. But salvation is a supernatural work that we can't manufacture or add to.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul makes it clear that the whole Christian life, from salvation to judgment, is one of the Holy Spirit and faith, hope, and love.

⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

We live by faith and it is through faith and the work of the Spirit that we can be confident that when we stand before Jesus on the day of judgment, we will be found righteous. Paul says it doesn't matter if you're circumcised or not. The only thing that matters is faith, which leads to love.

Then Paul expresses his concern in verses 7-9:

⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

Paul says that the Galatians seemed to start out well in the race that is the Christian life.⁸ Paul thought the Galatians had come to real, saving faith in Jesus. But now he's not so sure. Someone has "hindered" them or "cut in" (NIV) on them, keeping them from "obeying the truth."

There are some people who claim to be Christians who think others make too much of theology and the Bible. They think we should just go out and live like Jesus. There are a lot of problems with that mentality. First, how do we know that we should just live like Jesus? Is that true? And what does it mean to live like Jesus? It seems that some set of beliefs is inevitable. Second, Paul makes it quite clear that what we believe to be true matters. Why? Because "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." A little bit of false teaching works its way throughout the whole

⁷ CCC 2036: "The authority of the Magisterium extends also to the specific precepts of the *natural law*, because their observance, demanded by the Creator, is necessary for salvation."

⁸ Paul uses the race metaphor in 1 Cor. 9:24, 26; Phil. 2:16. See also Heb. 12:1.

church and through the lives of the people in the church. False ideas lead to wrong behaviors and broken relationships.

The reason why all of this matters is because it reveals the nature of our relationship with Jesus. What we believe and how we act reveals whom we trust. Do we trust Jesus or do we trust ourselves for salvation? And it matters who gets the credit—is it the triune God who gets the credit or can I take some credit, too? God saved us for his sake, that he would be glorified.

Even though Paul expresses his frustration with the Galatians, he believes they will come to their senses. But he's not so kind to the false teacher. We see this in verses 10-12:

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

Now Paul talks about the false teacher, the one who is troubling the Galatians. We don't know much about this person, or this group of people. What we know is they taught "a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6) that said it was necessary to believe in Jesus and to adhere to the law given to Israel through Moses. Apparently, this false teacher claimed that Paul, too, was preaching circumcision. It's not clear why that is so. In Acts 16, when we first hear of Timothy, Paul has him circumcised. Timothy was the son of a Jewish woman and a Greek man and, for whatever reason, he hadn't been circumcised when Paul met him. But because Paul was going to share the gospel with Jews, he had Timothy circumcised. Paul knew that circumcision wasn't necessary, but he also didn't want to offend other Jews. He wanted to gain an audience with them. However, this event probably happened after Paul wrote this letter. Perhaps he did something similar at an earlier time.

At any rate, Paul says that if he preached circumcision, then the offense of the cross would be removed. What is Paul saying here? He is saying that the gospel is a scandal, an offense. Paul was persecuted throughout his life and he died a martyr's death because he preached the real gospel. If he preached a message that says you can earn your salvation, he wouldn't have been met with so much resistance. Look at chapter 6, verse 12: "It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ." If you want to avoid persecution, don't preach the cross!

Now why is that so? The message of the cross says, “No!” to our pride. First of all, it says that all of us are broken and can’t be fixed by any human means. The cross tells us how evil we are. We are so bad that God had to become man and die. The theologian Thomas Torrance writes, “How abysmal and desperate the lost condition of man is, may be discerned in the fact that it needed nothing short of the Lord God himself to become one with us in our sin and death in order to redeem and save mankind.”⁹

If you want to share the gospel with someone and you want to get their attention, tell them you’re not a good person. Tell them you know how flawed you are, and how often you’ve failed. Tell them you still struggle with sin. Tell them that God’s standards are so high, you know you don’t measure up. This may shock them. But then tell them how Jesus took the penalty for your sin upon his own back when he died on the cross. Tell them about God’s grace.

The gospel is so scandalous that many people distort its message. There are two groups of people who call themselves Christians yet who deny the message of the cross. Liberal Christians deny that our real problem is sin. They deny the atonement, the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross for our sins. They say that Jesus is an example of how to live and his sacrifice was an example of how to give one’s self to others. Why would someone deny this truth? Because the cross is a scandal. Because it destroys the myth of human progress, that if only we had better education or technology or medicine or government, we could end all suffering. This view is simply not realistic. Over a hundred years ago, G. K. Chesterton wrote, “Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”¹⁰ His point is this: to know that sin our problem, just take an honest look around you and within you.

There are also legalistic Christians who stress obedience and following God’s commands so much that they make you think the core of Christianity is “do this, don’t do that.” There is no grace in their message. It’s all about rights and wrongs. Then there are the Christian cults, like Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, who teach that you can achieve salvation through obedience.

There are many ways to deny the truth of the gospel, and to remove the scandal of the cross. But any other message will not save. Only the truth will set us free (John 8:32). Paul thinks the truth is so important that he says, in verse 12, “I wish those who unsettle you would

⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 142.

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1908; repr. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 7.

emasculate themselves!” Paul is saying, “Those false teachers are so obsessed with circumcision, why don’t they go ahead and cut the whole thing off?” In Philippians 3:2, he calls such people “dogs” and “those who mutilate the flesh.” Perhaps Paul is subtly referring back to a passage in the law, Deuteronomy 23:1, which says, “No one . . . whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.” Those who insist on circumcision are not God’s people.

At this point, one may be wondering, “If circumcision and observance of the law aren’t necessary for salvation, then do we have to obey God?” Someone last week asked me, after the service, if we didn’t have to obey because I said the law wasn’t necessary for salvation. I don’t mind that someone asked that question. I think it’s natural for someone, after hearing much of Galatians, to begin to wonder if obedience is necessary. We should obey God. But our obedience doesn’t save us. Our obedience is the fruit of salvation, not the cause of it. What matters is our motivation: we should obey not to earn something from God, but because we love him and because we’re grateful. Jesus told his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandment” (John 14:15).

And, as I said earlier, we are freed from sin and the law so that we can love God and love others. We see this in verses 13-15:

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Christians shouldn’t use the freedom they have in Christ to continue to sin. Paul says we shouldn’t use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, which here means our sinful nature. (At other times “flesh” refers to the body, or to human effort.) If we do end up giving in to the desires of our flesh, we will end up biting and devouring each other. Paul seems to be hinting that such behavior comes from the devil, who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

Instead, we should serve one another through love. Actually, a more literal translate would be, “in love act as slaves toward one another.”¹¹

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 342.

The moral intent of the law was always love. That's what Paul was saying in verse 6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." And real love leads to obedience. If we love Jesus, we'll obey what he said, whether we are following his words or the message he gave to us through his apostles. If we love others, we'll treat them the way God wants us to treat them. In verse 14, Paul says that the law is fulfilled in this "word": "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He's quoting Leviticus 19:18. Jesus says the whole of the Old Testament can be summed up in two commands: Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34-40).

Love will always line up with truth. We don't define what love is. We let God do that. So we follow carefully the principles that run through the whole of the Bible, and we pay close attention to what Jesus taught and what the apostles taught. We find that the Bible teaches us that love is giving to others what is best for them. When we love God and love others, we won't be selfish. We won't continue to sin. In 2 Corinthians 5:14, Paul says "the love of Christ controls us." Our faith in Jesus, our love for God and others, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit keep us from pursuing sin. The law could never transform us so that we obeyed with the right motivation. After all, you can follow rules without having your heart in it. But love gives us the proper motivation to do what is right.

The gospel message itself can keep us on the right track. It tells us that we are so bad that Jesus died for our sin. And it tells us that we are so loved that the Father would send the Son to die for us. If we understand this message, we should be humble. We should be grateful. We should love God and be gracious to others.

So today, if you are legalistic or proud, you need to repent. If you have been relying on your good works, you need to come back to the gospel. If you are not obeying God out of love, you need to repent. If you're sinning, you need to come back to the gospel. We are free from sin, free from the law, free from pride and anxiety and worry. And we are free to love God and to love others. We are free to serve God by serving others. We were made to worship God, and our worship often is expressed in the way we interact with others, through service done in love. If you are in Christ, you are now free to worship God. That's a freedom that no one can take away.