

## **Called to Freedom and to Love**

A friend shared the story of a young man who asked for a meeting with his pastor. They met for breakfast, and the man told his pastor he had committed adultery with a co-worker. The pastor took a deep breath as he thought of the young wife and small children whose lives could be so terribly affected by the fallout from the infidelity. He began to talk with the man and ask him questions to help him think about what he might need to do in light of what he had already done. He spoke to him about his relationship with God and the need for confession and forgiveness. He spoke about his relationship with the woman with whom he had sinned and the need to break off that relationship and establish boundaries. He spoke about what he needed to do to make things right with his wife. When the pastor was finished, the young man pushed his plate away from him, leaned back in his seat, and said, *"I came for grace, not discipline; you disappoint me, pastor."* The words hit the pastor hard. It wasn't that he wondered if what he had said was right or if he spoke too harshly. It was that he wondered what could have led an intelligent man to think God's promises of grace somehow set us free from the responsibilities of love. He was surprised at how quickly the young man became more focused on accusing his pastor of hypocrisy than he was on assuming responsibility for his own actions.

When I heard that story, I thought of somewhat similar experiences I have had. Christian faith emphasizes God's grace. Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the full penalty for our sins. His resurrection is the dramatic confirmation that God has accepted the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of His people. Through faith in Christ, we receive grace, undeserved favor, that is greater than all of our sins. But it is so important for us to understand God's purpose in giving us such grace.

### **I. GOD'S GRACE GIVES US GREAT FREEDOM, IN ORDER TO GIVE US A UNIQUE OPPORUNITY.**

**Galatians 5:13** 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.* Freedom is one of the great themes of Galatians. Words like "free," "freedom," "slaves," and "slavery" appear 20 times in Galatians! Before I was a Christian, I thought God wanted me to behave. I did not know he cared about me and called me to be free.

*Freedom in Scripture is multifaceted, but in this particular passage, two primary truths stand out.*

**A. In Christ, you are called to freedom from what Scripture itself calls “*the curse of the law.*”**

This is talking about the law of God which is summed up in the ten commandments. There is nothing wrong with the law of God. It is perfect. It calls for perfect obedience, starting with love for God. The problem is no one can or has kept it perfectly except for Jesus. So listen to what **Galatians 3:12-13** says, *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”*<sup>11</sup> *Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”*<sup>12</sup> *But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”*<sup>13</sup> *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”*

There is a silly old fable that makes an important point. It’s about a man who dies and stands at the gates of heaven wanting in. The angel at the gate says, Here’s how this works; you need a hundred points to get into heaven. So tell me what you’ve done. Okay, the man says, “*I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her.*” The angel says, “I met her. We gave *her* points for that. I’ll give you minus one point for all the trouble you gave her.” “Minus one point!” the man said incredulously and with a bit of panic. “Well, I opened a shelter for the homeless and fed needy people in my city.” “That’s good,” said Gabriel. “You get 1.5 points for that. It might have been more, but you always bragged about that and felt superior to the people you helped.” “1.5 POINTS for that!” the man cried in desperation! “At this rate, I’ll only get to heaven by the grace of God.” “Ahh, come on in then,” said the angel. Grace is the way only way.

I like it that the story underscores the impossibility of earning your way into heaven. What’s questionable is it almost implies that you can make some small contribution. The reality is the Bible, **Isaiah 64:6**, says, even our best deeds are like filthy rags. It has to be only grace all the way. In the gospel, God is inviting you to give up on establishing your own value and righteousness and rest in what he alone can give you. You cannot establish a record of righteousness that will satisfy your own heart, much less God?

*This is a hard truth for some to face.* A diamond is hard, and because it is hard, it can cut through almost anything. Hard truths can cut through our misguided indifference, pride, and ingratitude and lead us to embrace the beauty and the freedom of the gospel. That's good. The only way to get out from under the curse of the law's condemnation is to trust in and receive as Savior the one who bore the curse for you.

*Now, in Galatians, there's another dimension to the freedom found in Christ. It's not only freedom from the condemnation of the law of God.*

**B. In Christ, you are called to freedom from the crushing constraints of legalistic religion.**

**Galatians 5:13** says we are *called to freedom!* This is not how many people think of Christianity. The background for Galatians is that after Paul started the church in Galatia, he went on to plant other churches. Then, certain teachers came into the church after Paul had left, and they began to teach a version of the Christian life that was legalistic.

What is legalism? It's not just a single teaching but a mindset. Legalism imagines God relating to you primarily as a strict lawgiver. The mindset of legalism thinks of relationship with God primarily as conditional and transactional. It doesn't "get" grace or trust grace. With that mindset, it tends to do a several of things. 1<sup>st</sup>.) Legalism tends to focus more on our efforts to keep the rules than on God's grace and empowerment. As a result, it is more anxious than joyful, more prideful than humble. 2<sup>nd</sup>.) It tends to add rules that are *not* in the Bible. If the Bible says it is good to meditate on the word of God, the legalistic mindset might make it a rule to do it every morning for thirty minutes. Then, if you find yourself missing a day, you beat yourself up as if you were a disappointment to God for not keeping a rule he never even revealed. 3<sup>rd</sup>.) Legalism tends to judge others by the extra-biblical rules it has established. If Scripture says parents should raise children in the Lord, some legalists might decide *all* Christians should *only* home-school. What could be a good decision for one family becomes a litmus test for judging all others. These are just suggestive examples.

It is important in discerning legalism to realize you cannot define it in a legalistic way. It is not as if this act or this view is *always* legalism! It's more about a mindset towards your Christian life and your relationship to God and others. Last week we quoted the historic, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, on Christian Liberty. It says through faith in Christ, we are set free from the guilt of sin and the wrath of God and given free access to God so that we yield obedience to him, "*not out of*

*slavish fear, but a child-like love and a willing mind.”* So one indicator for discerning whether or not you are to some degree infected with a legalistic spirit is whether or not you enjoy a certain childlike freedom in your relationship to God. Do you yield obedience to him *not out of slavish fear but a childlike love and a willing mind?*

Have you ever had a relationship with someone where the friendship was always at risk? If you did the wrong thing, or if the other person saw your bad side, they would be angry. So you do things, not because you want to or think it's right but just to stay on their good side? *There is no freedom in a relationship that is always at risk.* There is freedom in a relationship where grace and forgiveness can be counted on. That is the freedom to which God has called you!

### **C. In Christ, you are called to freedom so that you can live in love.**

What is it that makes a husband do something special or purchase a special gift to please his wife? We hope it is love that makes Him do those things. Now, if when they got married, she had her lawyer draw up a contract requiring him to buy her a gift on the first of each month or else pay a fine, it would ruin the whole thing. But if there is real freedom in the relationship and he freely chooses to do these things, then he is acting in love. God grants us freedom because what He wants is for us to willingly choose to give him the response of our love. The kind of love that God wants most from you can only be given and received in an atmosphere of freedom.

If your relationship with God depends on how good you are, you can *never* know if you are good enough. You can never be free from the fear of God's condemnation or just God's constant disfavor. You can't be free from the worries of life either. Jesus teaches us not to worry by telling us we have a father in heaven who loves, and cares for us. But if being a beloved child of God depends on how good you are, you can never know if you are good enough. Ironically, if your relationship with God depends on how good you are, you can never be yourself at your very best. In the Bible, the greatest strength for fighting sin and growing in Christ comes from the confidence that you have a new relationship with God, which is a grace that gives you a new identity and empowers you with a new dynamic for change. Over and over in the Bible, we are told because you *have received* grace, live for God. Because you *are* God's children by grace, live for God in obedience; because you are holy in God's eyes, live a holy life. Here in this passage, Scripture says, *because you are free, live a life of love!*

*It's important to see that...*

## **II. THE CHRISTIAN'S FREEDOM IS NOT A LIFE OF SINFUL INDULGENCE, IT IS A LIFE OF LOVING SERVICE.**

*The Christian love is described three ways in verses 13-15.*

*First,*

### **A. Christian love is a love that denies sinful indulgence.**

Look again at **Galatians 5:13** again: *For you were called to freedom, brothers.* In his commentary on Galatians John Stott says, *"the flesh, is not what clothes our bony skeleton, but our fallen human nature."*<sup>1</sup>

**Galatians 5:13** says, *Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*

In His book *True Spirituality*, Dr. Francis Schaeffer tells about a discussion group he was in with a group of Christians. They began to talk about all the legalistic lists of "dos" and "don'ts" they grew up with in their churches. They were all against that kind of thing. They all saw it as a narrow, stifling, self-defeating way of approaching the Christian life. At first, Dr. Schaeffer felt he agreed with them. However, as he listened, it became clear that what they really wanted was just to do all the things that had been forbidden. What they really wanted was just a looser, easier approach to living the Christian life. Dr Schaeffer said they were missing the point. *In giving up the legalistic view of the Christian life, we must be sure that we do this - not so that we can live looser but so that we can go deeper.* Don't you want that?

When you realize that any legalistic rule-centered approach to the Christian life is unfulfilling and insufficient, you turn away from that- what you are faced with is not some looser, easier way of living the Christian life! What you are faced with is something far more challenging. What you are faced with is the truth that you are to love God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind and you are to love your neighbor as yourself! Don't give in to the temptation to abuse your freedom in order to indulge yourself. Ask yourself whether you are using your freedom in Christ as an opportunity to enter more deeply and personally into a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ that reflects his goodness.

*Christian love is a love that denies sinful indulgence.*

*Second,*

### **B. Christian love is a love that serves others.**

**Verse 13** says...*do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.* **Verse 15** says *But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*

The only alternative God offers to the law of love is the law of the jungle. If we fail to submit our freedom in Christ to the disciplines of love we will end up as difficult human beings who hurt one another and who are capable of destroying one another. That's not the life to which God called you when He called you to walk with Him in freedom.

Christlike love doesn't stop at saying "no" to things that are clearly sinful it goes beyond that to actively care for others and show kindness to others even to the point of setting aside personal preferences and giving up personal freedoms to serve others. **Romans 14:15-19** says: *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup> So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup> So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.* Christian love is a love which is willing to lay aside legitimate freedoms to serve others for Christ's sake. Many churches suffered during the pandemic, not *just* because people held different convictions but because some, too often egged, on not by scriptural priorities, but by social media pundits, allowed their frustrations to become more important than the *pursuit of peace and mutual upbuilding.*

I asked myself this week: *What can I do that I don't have to do – but I could chose to do it for Christ and for others? What might I give up which, in itself is okay - I have the freedom to enjoy that thing, but I surrender that freedom - not out of slavish fear but out of childlike love with a willing mind to serve Christ and to show love?* I want that life!

*Christian love denies sinful indulgence, serves others, and third...*

**C. Christian love is a love that fulfills the law of God.**

***This freedom is not foolishness.*** Freedom doesn't mean freedom we can live selfishly, stupidly, and sinfully and in resistance to God while expecting to escape all the consequences and end up happy and wise.

That world doesn't exist, and that's not what we were made for. If you take a falcon out of its cage and lift it up into the air, you are setting it free because it is made to fly. But if you take a fish out of its aquarium and throw it up into the air... it's just not the same. Why? Because freedom has to honor what we are made for.

**Galatians 5:14** says; *For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* This doesn't mean we can forget the guidelines for life God has revealed in his word as long as we love others. What it means is if we truly focus on loving others, we'll find ourselves gladly fulfilling everything that the law commands us to do. There is a place in **Romans 13** (verses 8-10) where Paul explains that if you love people, you aren't going to steal, commit adultery, bear false witness, or covet – that would not be love. If you love others, you will not violate God's moral laws. You will fulfill them. God wants his commands fulfilled but he wants them fulfilled *in freedom for love*.

## Conclusion

What grace that God in Christ gave himself for us on the cross so that we could know the freedom of forgiveness, renewal, His presence, His promises, and ultimately, the freedom of eternity. Have you come alive to God through faith in Christ? If you have received the freedom that only Christ can give, what are you doing with that gift of freedom?

In JRR Tolkien's book, *The Two Towers*, There is a place where a king named Theoden has a counselor named Wormtongue, who is creepy and disloyal. When He is confronted with the way he has betrayed the king, he refuses to admit it. Some of the king's men want to kill him. But the king takes the advice of Gandalf, the wise, and sets him free. Gandalf basically says, give him a horse and let him go wherever he chooses. *He will reveal the truth about himself by the choices that he makes.* So this undeserving man is given the gift of freedom and, with it, the possibility to demonstrate the reality of his love, loyalty, and devotion to a good and gracious king. In the book, what His freedom reveals is that he is devoted not to His king but to Himself.

No Christian is so perfect as to always make the right choices or the best choices. We all need frequent forgiveness. But our choices are not insignificant either. God gives us freedom in Christ because our choices do matter. What you choose to do with the freedom God has given you reveals the truth about the direction of your life and the devotion of your heart. God has given us freedom in Christ so that we

can choose to give back to Him a gift that only the truly free can ever truly give, the gift of ourselves and our love.

**Amen**



## **A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ**

My Lord and My God, I have to confess I have at time foolishly thought that if I tried very hard, I could fix myself. I admit I cannot. Your holy law reveals my many shortcomings and sins. I thank you that Jesus kept your perfect law perfectly and offers people like me salvation and new life, by grace alone, though faith alone. I trust in him as my Savior and Lord. Amen!

## **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

Lord Jesus, Help me not to fall into selfish indulgence or unfruitful legalism. Create in me a clean heart and a willing spirit that I might embrace the freedom you give me in Christ so as to go deeper into a life of love for you and for others. By your Holy Spirit, strengthen my faith, and humility, my gratitude and devotion. In Jesus' name, Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, p. 140