

Firm in Freedom

Galatians 5:1-12

Let me invite your attention to Galatians chapter 5. We are continuing in our series through the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatian believers, and last week we wrapped up chapter 4, so this morning we will walk into the next chapter.

And as we do that we are stepping into the next section of the letter. The apostle Paul often structured his letters in a similar way. He would typically give some kind of greeting, maybe an example of how he has been praying for them, but then he would often spend the first main section explaining what God has done for us in the gospel and then at some point would shift to a new section saying, since all of that is true, then this is how we ought to live. In other words, his letters were typically theological and then practical, because the gospel should shape the way we live.

Galatians is really no different. The main difference is that Paul first needs to remind them of his testimony in order to reemphasize his authority against the false teachers who have come in, but then he dives into the theological and then the practical.

So, chapters 1-2 we might call biographical, chapters 3-4 theological, and chapters 5-6 practical. Obviously, there is theology throughout the whole letter but we can see those big shifts in his writing. So, today we step into the perhaps more practical section of the letter.

In other words, because everything that Paul has argued for in chapters 1-4 is true, what does that mean for us today?

And the first verse of chapter 5 is the key verse of the entire letter, so here is the heart of Paul's message to the church that had been tempted to abandon the gospel of grace and go back to relying on Jewish law for their salvation...

THE GOSPEL BRINGS FREEDOM (5:1)

Galatians 5:1

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

The theme of Galatians is freedom. That we are free because Christ has accomplished all that we could not and now his righteousness has been imputed to our account or given to us and we stand justified before God through our faith today and forever.

Again, Christian freedom through the gospel is the theme of Galatians. Remember this is not the first time Paul speaks of our freedom in the gospel...

Galatians 1:3-4

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, **4** who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father

Through the work of Jesus we have been delivered or rescued from this present evil age, this age that is marred by sin and death.

Galatians 3:13

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”

So, Jesus redeemed us, or purchased us out of slavery, he freed us from the curse of the law.

Now, Galatians 5:1, he says “For freedom, Christ has set us free.”

In each of those verses, Paul reminds them of the redemptive work of Jesus for us, his people. In chapter 1 and chapter 3, he speaks of Jesus redeeming us *out* of a particular realm or situation, but then here in chapter 5 he speaks of Jesus redeeming us *into* a particular realm. In other words, “our redemption is not merely rescue from something but rescue for something.”¹

We have been rescued *from* this present evil age, rescued *from* the curse of the law, but we have been rescued *for* freedom. As one writer has said, “Freedom is both the means and the end of the Christian life. Everything about the Christian gospel is freedom”²

And I think this is really important for us to grasp, because some of the reason why our culture rejects God, rejects Christ is because they think it is oppressive, not liberating. They argue that to acknowledge and answer to a higher being, some divine power, is just the opposite of freedom. It is submission and submission is always oppressive and harmful.

¹ Matthew S. Harmon, *Galatians*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 278.

² Timothy Keller, *Galatians For You*, 131

For example, the famous atheist Richard Dawkins has been quoted to say, "Being an atheist frees you up to live this life properly, happily and fully." Again, the thinking being that if there is no one higher than us to whom we need to answer, we are then, and only then, free.

We can see this line of thought propagated by the organization called the "Freedom from Religion Foundation," whose founder said, "To be free from religion is an advantage for individuals; it is a necessity for government."³

Again, this is a common refrain from many, at least here in the West.

However, the gospel tells us a different story. A better story. The gospel explains our origins, the reason for suffering and evil in our world, and most importantly, explains the hope we can have despite all of that. The gospel tells us of a Creator who sends his Son to redeem/rescue/deliver his people from the effects of sin. It tells us of Jesus, the Son, who willingly laid down his life for you and me, who rose from the dead to secure victory over death and Satan, and who will one day come again to redeem all things.

The truth is, the gospel really is liberating. Far from oppressive, the gospel brings life, freedom, hope, joy, and much more.

Jesus said in John 10:10...

John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

So, for the Christian, who has turned away from their sin, turned away from their self-righteousness and trusted in the finished work of Christ, we really are free.

However, the problem for the Galatian Christians, and the problem we still face today, is that it is easy to forget this. This is why Paul's exhortation for them, and us, is to "stand firm" and "not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

But the question should be, why would anyone submit themselves to slavery after being freed? This was the Galatians' dilemma. They had heard the gospel, but then they had been convinced that they needed to go back to the law, they needed to add their works to Christ's finished work. That was their dilemma, but that can easily become ours as well.

³ "Freedom from Religion Organization," <https://ffrf.org/about>.

To understand this to some extent, Tim Keller helpfully categorizes people into four groups by the ways they relate to and view the law, or religious striving.⁴ I think this is helpful:

1. Those who obey the law and rely on the law. He writes, “These people are under the law, and usually very smug, self-righteous and superior. Externally, they are very sure they are right with God, but deep down, they have a lot of insecurity, since no one can truly be assured that they are living up to the standard. This makes them touchy, sensitive to criticism and devastated when their prayers aren’t answered. This includes people of other religions, but here I am thinking mainly of people who go to church. These people have much in common with the Pharisees in Jesus’ day.”

2. Those who disobey the law but still rely on the law. He writes, “These people have a religious conscience of strong works-righteousness, but they are not living consistently with it. As a result of this, they are more humble and more tolerant of others than the ‘Pharisees’...but they are also much more guilt-ridden, subject to mood swings and sometimes very afraid of religious topics. Some of these people may go to church, but they stay on the periphery because of their low spiritual self-esteem.”

3. Those who disobey the law and do not rely on the law. Again, he writes, “These are the people who have thrown off the concept of the law of God. They are intellectually secular or relativistic, or have a very vague spirituality. They largely choose their own moral standards and they insist that they are meeting them...but usually there is a strong, liberal self-righteousness. They are earning their own salvation by feeling superior to others. It is just that this is usually a less obvious kind of self-righteousness.”

4. Those who obey the law but don’t rely on the law. “These are Christians who understand the gospel and are living out of the freedom of it. They obey the law of God out of grateful joy that comes from the knowledge of their sonship, and out of freedom from the fear and selfishness that false idols had generated.”

So, in summary, some people obey God’s law AND rely on it for their salvation. They are Pharisees at heart.

Other disobey God’s law but still rely on it for their righteousness. They are guilt-ridden because they know they aren’t meeting the standard of perfection.

Others disobey God’s law and don’t rely on it. They have completely cast off God, secular in mind and relativistic with all things spiritual.

⁴ This section comes from Keller, *Galatians For You*, 117-118.

And then there are Christians, who because of their understanding of the gospel, joyfully follow God's law, striving for holiness, but without relying on it for their salvation.

While the Galatian church had been a part of that last group, they had been convinced to join false teachers who were a part of that first or second group. That they need to obey the law, and even more than that, they need to rely on the law. And the danger is, we can be tempted to do the same.

Which really should be mind-blowing. Why in the world would any of us who understand the freedom of the gospel be tempted to rely on our own works again?

Another writer has pointed out that there is both **objective** freedom and **subjective** freedom in the gospel.

"As believers, we are freed *objectively* (technically, legally) from the guilt of sin, but we struggle to be free *subjectively* (experientially, daily) from the grip of sin."⁵

So, objectively we know what the Bible promises. For example, we know...

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 2:13-14

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

We *know* this is true, objectively, yet we so often fail to know this subjectively in our hearts, day after day.

So, instead of resting in the finished work of Jesus and walking in confidence, joy, boldness, because of the freedom we have found in the gospel, we live out of just the opposite.

In fact, if you regularly experience spiritual anxiety, or live with a continued sense of guilt for the ways you've failed God, seek to serve God and others but it is out of a sense of burden or duty, if you are driven by fear of what God thinks of you or what

⁵ Tony Merida, *Galatians, Christ-Centered Exposition*, 97.

others think of you, if you are proud because you see yourself better than others, if you are regularly discouraged or weary in your relationship with the Lord, any of those are a good sign that **though you might objectively know the gospel, you are not subjectively experiencing it.**

So, if that is you, hear the words of Galatians 5:1...

Galatians 5:1

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

Stand firm. Don't give in to the temptation, whether that is by others in your life or whether that is by your own heart, don't give into the temptation to rely on your religious striving for your acceptance before God. Walk in the freedom you already have if you've trusted in Christ.

Another writer said, "Sanctification is...simply getting used to justification."⁶

So, we should ask ourselves, Does my heart know what my head knows to be true? Has my soul rested in what Jesus has accomplished? Or am I still tempted to put on the yoke of slavery, bearing the crushing weight that religious striving brings with it?

Again, stand firm in the freedom of the gospel.

As we go on in chapter 5 Paul continues with this instruction in this call to stand firm...

STAND FIRM IN THE FACE OF LEGALISM (5:2-6)

Galatians 5:2-4

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.

Again, remember following and relying on Jewish law for salvation was the false gospel that was being presented to them, which is why Paul highlights circumcision here. This was the call, for Gentile believers to be circumcised in order to be counted among God's people.

But Paul offers three warnings here against legalism. He says legalism:

⁶ Gerhard Forde, *Christian Spirituality*, 13.

Legalism devalues Christ (v. 2) - because to say we need our works to save us is to say that Christ is not sufficient.

Legalism demands perfection (v. 3) - If you want to be accepted as righteous by your works then you must be perfectly righteous. There is no middle ground, either you are perfect or you are not.

Legalism distorts grace (v. 4) - It is not the gospel of grace. A gift cannot be earned, only received, otherwise it is no longer a gift.

By the way, this is not teaching that one loses their salvation. The Bible is abundantly clear that does not happen. For those who are truly saved, their salvation is secure. It is speaking of someone walking away from the *doctrine* of grace.

But again, he says stand firm in the face of legalism. It is not the true gospel, but a distortion.

ILLUS. - Back in 2012, a particular piece of art gained attention and become a viral sensation, maybe you remember this. It was a painting from 1930 titled “Ecce Homo” (Latin for “Behold the man,” What Pilate said at Christ’s trial).

PICTURE 1

This was painted by a Spanish artist and since 1930 it has hung in a church in Spain. Well, you can tell that it had begun to experience some deterioration. So, someone volunteered to try and restore it to its former beauty. And, this is how it turned out...

PICTURE 2

Now, I’m not a professional artist, but I know that’s not good. It doesn’t look the same as the original. It has been distorted, so much so that it isn’t a restoration or an enhancement, but destruction.

Well, what’s true of this painting is true of the gospel as well. The finished work of Christ can’t be refinished and, in fact, it doesn’t need restoration. It can only be distorted and, if distorted, it is destroyed. When we begin to believe and rely on the message that I can add my own righteousness to Christ’s righteousness, when I can add my works to Christ’s work, it is no longer the gospel that I am believing in. It is altogether something else.

Let’s go on in chapter 5...

Galatians 5:5-6

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.

Again, notice, we wait for the hope of righteousness, we don't work for it.

Hope is not merely wishing without assurance. Hope in the biblical sense is an assured knowing. Paul is saying we really can live today with assurance for what awaits us in Christ. Consider, Christians are the only people who can live this way. A secular person can't. A follower of any other religion can't. Only Christians can look at their future this way. Non-religious people have no idea where they will be in a million years, religious people without the gospel live in constant anxiety about where they will be, unable to look ahead with any kind of "eagerness." But if you rely on the finished work of Christ, you can know what is to come and eagerly wait for it.

Going on in chapter 5, he continues to instruct them to stand firm in the face of false teachers...

STAND FIRM IN THE FACE OF FALSE TEACHERS (5:7-12)**Galatians 5:7-12**

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!

Notice what Paul says in this paragraph about these false teachers who are "unsettling" the believers there:

False teachers are contrasted with God (v. 8) - these guys are not representing Christ at all.

False teachers are dangerous (v. 9) - they and their teaching are insidious, if not stopped, they will crawl their way into every crack and crevice of the local church fellowship.

False teachers will face serious judgment (v. 10) - they will answer to the Lord they are misrepresenting.

And finally, in that last verse, the very colorful verse 12, false teachers don't deserve sympathy OR Paul may be calling out their hypocrisy. Remember the issue has revolved around circumcision. Paul could simply be letting out his frustration and anger towards the false teachers. Remember he is human.

Or, there might be an allusion to other pagan priests of other religions. There were some pagan religions where the priest would be castrated as a symbol of their commitment to the priesthood. Paul might be saying, if these false teachers that are bothering you all think that they are holy because of the ritual of circumcision, let's see how holy they really are!

But look again at v. 11...

Galatians 5:11

But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

No doubt, some of the false teachers were telling the church, you misunderstood Paul, Paul actually agrees with us. We are preaching the same message.

So, Paul says here, if I was preaching the same message, why am I suffering so much? Why am I being persecuted by people like the Judaizers?

We are reminded here that while the gospel brings freedom, the gospel also brings persecution.

The message of the cross is offensive. It says we are sinners who can't save ourselves. It says that our sin was so bad that God himself had to take on flesh and shed his blood to atone for it. It says that the only way we can be made right with God is to accept the only free gift that can save us, and all other offers and attempts at salvation are insufficient.

Every preacher must choose what message he will believe and preach. And so must every Christian. Will it be the law or the cross? Works or faith? Salvation by grace alone through faith alone or by merit alone through works alone?

CONCLUSION

As we wrap up this passage this morning, remember, that if you've turned to Christ with repentant faith, the gospel has freed you. Freed you from atoning for your own

past sins, freed you from trying to impress God or others by your own spirituality or morality, freed you from living in constant anxiety of whether or not God is pleased with you, freed you from the weariness of running on the religious treadmill.

Stand firm in the face of distorted gospels and destructive teachers. Stand firm even when your heart pulls you back to reliance on the law or religious striving. Remind your heart what your head knows to be true. The gospel has freed you.

CONFESSION

Let's spend a moment in silent prayer and confession, with heads bowed and eyes closed. Confess the ways in which you might rely on the law and rest once again in the freedom you have received in the gospel of Jesus.

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Again, if you are a follower of Jesus this morning, your sins have been totally atoned for and you stand accepted before God because of Jesus and Jesus alone. This is objectively true, even if your heart is struggling to believe it this morning.

1 John 3:19-20

19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;

20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

Let's stand and continue in worship...

VERSES/SLIDES

Galatians 5:1

Galatians 1:3-4

Galatians 3:13

John 10:10

Romans 8:1

Colossians 2:13-14

Galatians 5:1

Galatians 5:2-4

PICTURE 1

PICTURE 2

Galatians 5:5-6

Galatians 5:7-12

Galatians 5:11

1 John 3:19-20

SERMON DISCUSSION

1. How does the gospel answer the claim that God or religion is oppressive?
2. Explain Keller's four groups of people in relation to the law. Is there one group that you tend to slip towards when you forget the gospel?
3. What does it mean to *objectively* know the gospel but not *subjectively*? Have you ever struggled with that before?
4. What are some of the distortions of the gospel prevalent in society, which are actually destructions of the gospel?
5. Why is a message of complete and total freedom so offensive?