

Freedom
Galatians 5:1-6
June 8, 2025

24601. That was the number assigned Jean Valjean, the number that defined him during the nineteen years he lived with a chain around his neck. If you know his story, he was originally sentenced to five years. But five became nineteen due to his repeated attempts to escape. Hugo writes that those attempts were impulsive, “like a wolf that finds its cage open.”¹ But after nineteen years, Valjean’s finally told, “You are free.”²

Yet, the book goes on to describe what unfolds for this *former* inmate, the one carrying around yellow papers that continued to make his incarceration *quite* present. In fact, Hugo writes, “Release is not the same as liberation.”³

For *that*, he’d need something else. Which of course leads us to his meeting the Bishop of Digne. This bishop isn’t like everyone else, leaving Valjean out in the cold. Even though he tells the bishop how dangerous he was, detailing the realities of those papers he always carried around, the bishop sets an extra place at the table. He puts clean sheets on the bed.

But in the deepest sense, Valjean is still imprisoned. And later that very evening he shows it, stealing silver from the Bishop’s cupboard.

Of course, he doesn’t make it far. The next day three men drag him by the scruff of his neck back to the Bishop’s home. And he, the one who’d shown such kindness to Valjean, could’ve easily pointed the finger, sending Valjean back to 24601.

Instead, he says, “You forgot the candlesticks I gave you.” And so, the men let him go. And, this time, Valjean’s release is more than merely that. Because the one that bore the cost, the one that forgave, leaned in and said, “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you.”⁴

The men released him. He was free to *go*. The bishop leaned in and whispered. He was free to live. In fact, a few pages later Hugo writes, “One thing was certain, and he himself did not doubt it: that he was no longer the same man, that already everything about him had changed, and it was no longer in his power to act as though the bishop had not spoken to him.”⁵

Today’s sermon is entitled “Freedom.” Today’s *text* is about freedom. In fact, the entire book, in one sense, has been about it. Note first,

1. Freedom’s Command (v. 1)

Within that wording is intentional tension. And it’s intended to push against abstract, vague notions of freedom. Right now—if I closed my eyes—I could see the screen of a church I was in 20-plus years ago. On that screen were the lyrics we were to sing, “I am free. I am free. I am free.” I can still see that screen, and *that* moment is still with me, because I remember thinking, and being struck by the question, “Free from *what*?”

Our country’s founders wrote eloquently about freedom. Our soldiers fought to secure it, and to keep it. William Wallace gave a stirring speech about it. But, of course, when many in our world speak of freedom, they mean to be free from any and every sort of restraint.

¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 78.

² Hugo, 82.

³ Hugo, 83.

⁴ Hugo, 90.

⁵ Hugo, 95.

Now, I'm not going to act as if I know what *every* person means by the term, but I *do* know that when Paul uses that language, he's pointing us to something in particular, the freedom Christ died to secure.⁶ That's what *he* means by freedom. And what Christ died to secure is not, "You're free to do whatever you like, to live however you please."

It's *not* that; it's *better* than that. Christ purchased the kind of freedom that enables you to live as you're intended to live.

Meaning, first, freedom from the condemnation of the Law. Last week's text made clear that we're *not* children of the bondwoman, born according to the flesh, born into slavery. Instead, we're children of the promise, those God had in mind when He declared that He would one day bless. Those stars Abraham saw in Genesis 15 included *us*. And to bring *that* about, Christ came and redeemed us from the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13). And He redeemed those under the Law that He might *also* adopt them (Gal. 4:5). So, no longer a slave, but a son. And because He's made us His child, He's also called us His heir (Gal. 4:7).

So, we're free from the Law's condemnation. But we're *also* free from attempting to work our way to God. One is an heir, *not* because he or she earned it, but because he or she is a child.

So, for the Galatians, bondage was their past (Gal. 4:3). Paul's reminded them in this letter: they *were* slaves (Gal. 4:8). But Paul's also clear that they are so *no* longer. Christ set them free.

Verse 1 tells us *why*, and it's one of those truths that's so simple we're in danger of missing it. *Why* did Christ set us free? Verse 1: **It was for freedom that Christ set us free.** Yes, you're reading it rightly. It's *that* simple. He set us free for *the purpose of freedom*.⁷ Or, to think of it another way: He set us free—in the *past*—for the purpose of ongoing, present and future tense liberty. It was to be a new state, a new status, a reality they were to *go on* living in.

Which is what verse 1 goes on to say, by way of command. He's going to move from the indicative statement, the statement of fact—**It was for freedom that Christ set us free**—to a command that springs from that freedom.

The "therefore" connects these clauses,⁸ leading to freedom's *command*: **therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.** So—if you've been set free, *stand* in the freedom Christ secured. It's a command to *live in* the reality of the gospel, to continue to believe it, and to continue to live as if it's true—as if *these* truths actually define you and your days. We might say, **the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me** (Gal. 2:20).

To *keep* standing firm is, of course, a present-tense command—something that's to be habitual.⁹ There are a number of ways we might think about applying this. I found helpful Andy's language from Wednesday night concerning acquiring a biblical vocabulary. And while he was referring to assurance from the book of Romans, you could absolutely do the same thing with *any* gospel-reality. Whatever the gospel truth, there are promises to hide in our hearts, images of salvation to meditate upon, truths that we're to steep in.

Because this vocabulary is learned *for the purpose of* preaching to ourselves. We've said this before, but no one preaches to you more than *you*—for good or ill. So, what would it mean to first build a vocabulary of gospel realities, and *then* assault your senses with the truth that you were indeed a slave, but in grace made a child? Or that you were indeed once chained in bondage, but freed by Christ that you might live?

⁶ Leon Morris, *Galatians*,

⁷ Tom Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT, 307.

⁸ Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians*, Founders Study Guide Commentary, 93.

⁹ David DeSilva, *Galatians*, Baylor Handbook, 102.

We're to *keep* standing firm in our freedom, and that's regardless of what's surrounding us, what's pressing in on us. Keep in mind that the Judaizers were not meek and mild. They sought the Galatians, eagerly (4:17), pushing their message on them relentlessly. Paul uses quite strong language to describe these evil workers (Phil. 3). But his command here is, in the *midst* of that, surrounded by that, to **keep standing firm**.

By the way, the vocabulary you rehearse isn't mere mantra-like mindless repetition. In fact, you're not even alone in using these truths to endure. Because *by* the Spirit within you, when those truths are rehearsed *by* you, they are *also* given life by *Him*. Within you, the Spirit doesn't cry out, "slave"; He's always crying out, "son." And He doesn't cry out to a ruthless taskmaster, He's always crying out, "Abba! Father!"

Further, He's doing that within *each* one of *us*. I stand firm in it. You stand firm in it. In that, we help one another to stand firm.

Based on the gospel reality, the first command of freedom is to keep standing firm. But there's a second as well, and it's nearly the same thing—though stated negatively, **and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery**.

2. The Consequences of Choosing Slavery (vv. 2–4)

You know the first thing Valjean does *after* he's released by the men at the bishop's doorstep, *right* after he's spoken to by the bishop himself? He steals a forty sous coin from a little boy. Maybe you say, "I thought he was changed." He *was*. In fact, on the very *next* page he starts calling out for the boy, running after him, trying to give the coin back. Then he bursts into tears for the first time in 19 years. In fact, Hugo writes that "he did not recognize himself."¹⁰

But maybe you recognize that battle. The old man rearing his ugly head. It's not unlike the Israelites, on the heels of deliverance, begging to be taken back to Egypt—or later those who'd grown up around idolatry building a golden calf. It's been said by a few, "You can take Israel out of Egypt, but not all of Egypt out of Israel." This is the fight described by Paul in Romans 7. It's what's raging within the Galatians as well. It's almost like a spiritual Stockholm Syndrome, the temptation to return to the very thing that formerly enslaved.

So, Paul attempts to pull the wool *off* their eyes, to bluntly point out what it would mean to go back. The language is akin to our phrase, "Mark my words."¹¹ Verse 2: **Behold** (look!) **I** (emphatic!), **Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision**.

Now, just to be clear, Paul's not anti-Jewish, nor anti-circumcision. Later in Acts he'd even encourage it among those seeking to reach the Jewish people (Acts 16:3). However, when it was made a *demand* on adult male Gentile converts, then it became a different matter.¹² And we know that was the case, based on Acts 15:1: **Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved**. If you want to know *what* Paul opposed in the simplest of terms, that's it.

And he opposed it because it was contrary to the gospel. But the fact that verse 2 says "if," tells us that they hadn't gone that far just yet.¹³ So, *before* they did, Paul labors to make clear the gospel ramifications. If *that* was what they (the Judaizers) taught, there could be no compromise.¹⁴

¹⁰ Hugo, 94.

¹¹ Vaughan, 94.

¹² Morris, 154.

¹³ DeSilva, 103.

¹⁴ Vaughan, 94.

There could be no combination of Paul's gospel with this aberrant addition. In short, the Galatians couldn't have it both ways.¹⁵ They must choose.

Why? Mark his words. Verse 2 again: **Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.** He's *already* said this, in one sense, back in chapter 2, writing this: **if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly** (Gal. 2:21).

As we'll see in a moment, to receive circumcision was something of a pledge to live by the entirety of the Law.¹⁶ Circumcision, in a sense, stood for the whole thing—the whole thing being an alternate means of being made right with God.¹⁷ And Paul says that should you choose to receive it, **Christ will be of no benefit to you.** In short, Jesus of Nazareth is of advantage *only* to those who trust Him exclusively.¹⁸ The Solas stand. It's Christ *alone*—not Him *plus*.

So, the first consequence of dabbling in the Law for the purpose of salvation is to miss salvation altogether. Why is that? Paul repeats himself in verse 3, reminding the Galatians of what he'd said back in chapter 3: **And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.**

What does that remind you of from back in chapter 3? **Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them** (Gal. 3:10). Hear the word Paul emphasizes: “abide,” and the phrase he underlines: “all things.”¹⁹ The Law's demand is both *complete* and *perpetual* obedience. Those that hear that Law were to perform *all* things. And they were to do so *always*.

Here he's testifying *again* that if you pick one thing from the Law as a means toward salvation, then you're *also* picking up the entirety of the Law, *as well as* the obligation to perform it—all of it, *always*. The Law is united in that way. So, while the Judaizers certainly misunderstood what Christ had done, they *also* misunderstood the Old Testament.

The first consequence of receiving circumcision as a means toward salvation is to miss salvation entirely. The second consequence explains why. You miss salvation entirely because you place yourself under a burden you can't bear. The good news is that someone came to bear it for you. But should you choose the treadmill of works righteousness *instead*, He—the person at the epicenter of that good news—is no longer of any benefit to you.

Paul continues listing the consequences in verse 4—in *one* sense repeating himself, but in *another* sense doubling down: **You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.** The Galatians just weren't seeing all this rightly. So, Paul lays it out; and he does so bluntly.

Of course, Friday was 81 years since D-Day. A couple years back, as I was talking to one of my kids about World War II, I realized that they just didn't grasp the significance of it. That wasn't their fault; it was mine. I had some work to do. So, for a couple years now I've regularly sought to tell them about the forces at play, the countries involved, the staggering numbers of casualties. They've heard about Normandy and Dunkirk and Auschwitz and Anne Frank. They've heard *a lot* about my grandfather in the Philippines.

Anyways, within the past week one of them was reading a book set in the late 30s in Germany. And then Friday night they asked if they could watch the 1975 film about Corrie Ten Boom. And though I don't *always* let them, the questions they were asking—and the desire to watch

¹⁵ John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, BST, 133.

¹⁶ Vaughan, 94.

¹⁷ Stott, 133.

¹⁸ Vaughan, 94.

¹⁹ Vaughan, 63.

that 50-year-old film—told me something had clicked. Years ago, they didn’t grasp it. But now, finally, they were seeing it rightly.

Paul is attempting to pull the Galatians out of their stupor, attempting to show them in full color what’s true—the danger of the Judaizers. The Galatians can’t have it both ways. To believe those falsehoods and to act on what they’re being told, *is* to be severed from Christ. It *is* to fall from grace. Paul doesn’t mince words. *Those* are the consequences.

So, are we seeing the danger of works—righteousness rightly? Do we think we have a little to add to what Christ has done?

What former bondage do you find yourself strangely drawn back to? What condemned you, wore you down, ruled you with fear—but still whispers, ‘Come back?’” Hear Paul again: **It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.**

3. Freedom’s Contrast (vv. 5–6)

Verse 5: **For we.** It’s no longer the “you” of verse 2, or the “every man” of verse 3, it’s *we*. Paul includes *himself* in this description. And he’s including himself in a community of people that he’d elsewhere call “the true circumcision” (Phil. 3:3).

And what *they* did was in contrast to what those mutilators of the flesh encouraged. Verse 5: **For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.** Both of these final two verses talk about faith. But Paul makes sure to speak of the ongoing and vital work of the Spirit. What the people of God do, how they live, is *by* faith. But it’s *through* the Spirit.

Through faith we’ve received the promise, that is, *Him*—the third Person of the Trinity (Gal. 3:14). God sent Him to dwell in our hearts (Gal. 4:6). Galatians 5 will unpack this reality further, detailing that which makes us able to walk in the Spirit and even produce *His* fruit.

There’s much more on that to come, but Paul’s just hinting at it here. In *this* context he’s highlighting what the true circumcision does. Or, in other words, what does freedom in Christ *actually* look like? Through the Spirit, by faith, we **are waiting for the hope of righteousness.**

That means we’re not spending our days attempting to *earn* righteousness. We’ve been freed from that. Concerning full deliverance, we’re not working; we’re waiting. We wait for, hope for, that which Another earned. There is a final verdict ahead. And if it were based on adherence to the Law, we’d be right to cower in fear, to live enslaved. That burden would be chains. But instead, we consider what perfect righteousness purchased. If we belong to Christ, then we are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:29). We don’t work for *that*. Instead, *through* the Spirit, *by* faith, we wait for it.

Verse 6: **For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything.** Neither has *any* power to accomplish a single thing in the realm of salvation.²⁰ So, what *does* count? What means something? Paul’s already talked about faith and hope. The third of that famous group of virtues is in verse 6: **For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.**

In these last couple chapters, Paul is transitioning to the practical outworking of this gospel of freedom. Yes, Christ freed us from slavery to sin and self. But He *also* freed us to live as we’re intended to live—by faith in the Son of God, in the power of the Spirit, *by* Whom we’re enabled to love.

²⁰ DeSilva, 107.

Conclusion

Which is, of course, what Valjean goes on to do in *Les Misérables*. As you might recall, through a host of events, his life intersects with an orphan named Cosette. But then, through a host of events, they're separated. Being an orphan, Cosette was soon "taken in" by—or, better, put under the thumb of—two of most ruthless characters in any novel I've ever read. Hugo writes, "that man and that woman were cunning and rage wedded together, a hideous and terrible coupling."²¹ Cosette was, of course, caught between them, ground down by them, running, washing, brushing, sweeping, racing, lifting, puffing, panting, doing all the exacting work of the home while the task-masters of the house barked and bit. And then *still* never accept her.

But eventually Valjean finds her; and quickly he redeems her. In fact, Valjean tells the "man" of that house, "You will not know where I live, you will not know where she is, and my intention is that she never sees you again in her life. I break the rope she has tied around her foot."²² And off they go, he the father she never had, her the child his imprisonment stole from him.

But the next morning, when she wakes up, she does so with a start—startled into frenetic declarations and activity, "Yes, Madame, here I am! Here I am!" while throwing herself out of bed, shooting toward the corner of the room, looking for the broom.

But before her hand found one, she sees the one she was now with. Then she says, to him, something about their living quarters, "It's so nice here!" Hugo narrates, "It was a ghastly dump, but she felt free."

And then the book tells us her first question, "Don't I have to sweep?"²³

You know the answer. He *badn't* delivered her so that she would tidy the floor.

He redeemed her. Adopted her. And *now*—she was free.

It's for freedom that Christ set us free. Keep standing firm in it. And do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

²¹ Hugo, 319.

²² Hugo, 349.

²³ Hugo, 362.