

MBC – 7/17/2022 – Pastor Doug Thompson
 PAUL’S EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS – GOSPEL FREEDOM
“Fighting for Your Freedom”
 Galatians 5:1-15

Let’s jump right into our study this morning, and we pick up where we ended last Sunday with Paul giving his battle cry for Gospel freedom—

- Galatians 5:1–15 ¹For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ²Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. ⁷You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰I 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. ¹¹But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹²I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

I. What freedom are we fighting for?

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

This is a banner that should fly over every Christian church: “For freedom Christ has set us free!” Jesus set us free and he wants us to live free. Paul commands to fight for our freedom in Christ. But we need to be very clear on what this blood-bought freedom is.

The cry for freedom is on the lips of people around the world today: The Ukrainians want to be free from Russian oppression. Some people here are crying out to be free from our Constitution. Others are crying out for our govt. to protect our constitutional freedoms: some are screaming and demanding the freedom to have abortions. Others are worried that our second amendment freedoms are about to be lost, or our freedom of speech.

America was birthed over the issue of freedom from Great Britain, and we’ve always been feisty when anyone or anything threatens our freedom—

- I just read a story about an American visiting at a friend’s home in England. When he asked the American how he likes his tea, he said, “In the Boston Harbor, if you please!”

We love that flag that says, “Don’t Tread on Me!” *Freedom!*

This is political freedom – which is worth fighting for and even dying for. But Paul isn't talking about political freedom here. The freedom Paul is talking about is unaffected by whether you live under a constitutional democracy or a totalitarian dictatorship. It is unaffected by whether or not you are free to walk the streets or even confined to a jail cell – as Paul was when he wrote 4 of his best epistles – and never once even asked for prayer to be set free. Because he was already free! I want you to look with me at an amazing passage—

- 1 Corinthians 7:20–22 ²⁰Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. (He means called to Christ).

General rule: keep doing what you were doing when God saved you. I.e., Don't be obsessed with changing your life situation, job, marital status, etc. when God saves you. Stay put, bloom where you are planted, and glorify God where He put you. But what if God called you while you were a slave – Paul said "Christ set you free!" Well he deals with that specifically—

- ²¹Were you a bondservant (*doulos* = slave, one who belonged to another) when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. ²²For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ.

Amazing! Yeah, if you can get free, sure, go for it. If not, *you are still free in Christ!*

Paul is also not dealing with religious freedom in this passage – the freedom to worship as you please, unhindered. Again, this country was founded by people who crossed the ocean because they wanted religious freedom. Many of the colonists who supported the war against Great Britain were Christians who didn't want the Church of England telling them what to believe or how to live. They fought for our religious freedom! I'm glad they did, aren't you?

But Paul is *not* talking about religious freedom here.

- Two years ago when our governor was ordering churches not to gather for worship; telling us we couldn't sing, or hug each other – and some churches in Canada were actually being padlocked, all of that was wrong – that affected our "*religious freedom*," but it didn't affect our freedom in Christ one bit.

Beloved, the freedom we have in Christ transcends any earthly bondage, or persecution or ungodly laws! You can be locked in jail as a political prisoner, or locked in a bad marriage, or a horrible job; you can be bound by debt, or bedridden with a degenerative disease – but if Jesus has set you free, you are free indeed!

- In 1986 I spent time with pastors in Communist Romania – I was teaching them the book of Philippians – one of Paul's prison epistles. We had to be so careful in our meetings because the Communist secret police were always watching. Men with machine guns and German shepherds were everywhere. Those pastors never knew who might inform on them, and they could be arrested and tortured. Like Richard Wurmbrand, the Romanian pastor who wrote "Tortured for Christ."

- But those were some of the most free people I have ever met – because they were free in Christ! I remember asking one of them, “Don’t you pray to see Communism overthrown so you can be free?” He just shrugged and said, “We pray for you Christians in America, living in such affluence!”

I want you to be clear on this: The freedom Paul is talking about is **Gospel freedom**: we have been liberated from the guilt of our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ! Jesus preached this at the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth—

- Luke 4:18 ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

He wasn’t talking about political freedom or religious freedom. He didn’t come to free them from Roman oppression. Jesus came to give spiritual liberty to spiritual captives by setting them free from the oppression of sin and Satan.

Gospel freedom is freedom from the fear of judgment and condemnation, freedom from doubt over what God thinks of us – we *know* that He sees us spotless and blameless, as sinless – in His Son! The freedom we have is a clear conscience because we know that God does not keep account of our – because they have all been accounted to Christ!

*My chains are gone, I've been set free,
My God, my Savior, has ransomed me!*

- In Jesus, we have freedom from fear over our circumstances, our future, our health, and even death – my pastor friend, Lloyd Johnson, passed away from cancer this week. Death set his body free from pain and suffering but his soul was already free in Jesus.

And **Gospel freedom** doesn’t just free us from the penalty and punishment of our sins, but also from the dominating power of sin in our lives. At the cross, Jesus broke the power of sin for His people. And beloved, you need to take that on faith, not feelings. It is a fact that you need to believe, even when you *feel* that sin has you in chains. You do not have to submit to sin. You are more than a conqueror in Christ. Believe it and live it!

The only thing that can take away your Gospel freedom in Christ – is you – when you fail to believe Gospel promises. And that is exactly why Paul wrote Galatians, and why we are studying it this morning. So Paul brings up a specific issue, a specific test of whether or not they will believe the Gospel—

I. True and false Christians (vv.1-6).

- ²Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

We have already seen that the Judaizers – those who wanted to put Christians under the Law again – had made circumcision the test. They came to the leaders of the Jerusalem Council to state their case—

- Acts 15:1 ¹But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Pretty clear: trusting in Jesus is not enough, you must add circumcision to be saved. Do it and you will be saved, don't do it, and you will not be saved. Remember in ch.2, when they insisted that Gentile Titus be circumcised, Paul said "Absolutely not – so that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you."

- So here, Paul turns their statement around and says, "No, if you do circumcise, you cannot be saved – Christ's death will be of no advantage to you."

Now we need to be clear that Paul couldn't care less whether or not they circumcised their baby boys – and that is still a non-issue for Christians. The issue wasn't the physical act, the issue was whether they were *trusting* in that physical act to gain acceptance with God. Do you understand that? He says later—

- Galatians 6:15 ¹⁵For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And back to—
- 1 Corinthians 7:18–19 ¹⁸Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised (that would be a Jew)? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised (a Gentile)? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. (which obviously is not the Law of Moses, because Moses commanded circumcision!)

To the Judaizers, circumcision was like a symbol that stood for their religion of salvation by law-keeping. That's what Paul objected to. So what he is saying is: "If you believe that circumcision, or any other ritual or observance, will gain you acceptance with God – you cannot be saved, because you are not trusting in Christ alone for salvation."

The issue wasn't circumcision, it was what it represented which was lack of belief that trusting Jesus is all God requires for salvation.

- This gets right down to our hearts: "Is there anything you do in hope that God will accept you – *in place of* trusting in Christ alone – or *in addition to* trusting in Christ?" (repeat) Maybe another way to ask the question is: "If you took away _____ would you worry about your salvation?" Maybe that is reading your Bible, religiously, every day, or going to church, religiously, every Sunday. For some, it is worshiping on the Saturday Sabbath, or giving to some charity, or whatever – if you stopped doing that, would you be insecure about your salvation?

If you would, you aren't trusting in Jesus alone to save you.

- Or maybe you are relying on stuff that you *don't* do to make you holy and accepted by God. Back to the question we asked last Sunday: "If you were to die and stand before God and He were to ask you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?" Now look at your heart: would you be tempted to say, "Oh Lord, you know that I never took drugs. . . I never cheated on my spouse. . . I never smoked cigarettes, and I never saw one episode of Seinfeld – but I did slip once and watched "Friends," have mercy on my sinful soul!"

If that's what you would say, then you aren't trusting in Jesus alone.

*Am I saying that if you still place even a little confidence on things you do or things you don't do to get you to heaven, that you aren't saved? Beloved, God knows your heart, and maybe your faith is just small and weak – isn't that all of us to one degree or another? But this morning, I want to set your heart free: You can trust in Jesus, *alone* to save you! If you trust in anything else, your conscience will never give you rest. It will accuse you and mock you because you will never live up to your own standards.

- That's why we say around here: Preach the Gospel to yourself, daily. 1) *gaze* on the beauty of Christ, 2) *remember* who you are as a child of God, 3) *rest* in His power and provision. That is how you *keep* your Gospel freedom.

Let's go on—

- ³I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision (to be right with God) that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

You want to be saved by your Law-keeping? Then the standard is perfection. You will fail, and you will be damned—

- ⁴*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law* – a little play on words there: you like *cutting*, well you are cut off from Christ – *you have fallen away from grace*. (He means: you can't mix God's grace and your works. He offers salvation as a gift, if you try to pay for it, putting God in debt to you – you forfeit grace.) ⁵*For through the Spirit, by faith, (not by any lawkeeping) 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.*

The Christian life is not about rules, but about relationship: we fix our hearts on trusting in Jesus, and loving like Jesus. And the key to all of this what we will see next Lord's Day – you can't miss that.

II. True and false teachers (vv7-12).

- ⁷You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

“You've drifted off course! And this is not from God! You have given your ear to false teachers with a false gospel! You fell for their lies – Oh, they seem so spiritual, they weep as they beg for your money.” And all you have to do is turn on the TV to see that they are still doing it. But remember what Paul said in the first chapter—

- Galatians 1:11–12 ¹¹For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹²For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

So do you believe that this is the Word of God and that Paul was speaking the truth or not? If you do, then any other message is a false gospel and will not save you—

- A few years ago there was a false message infecting many churches. It was the so-called *New Perspectives on Paul* – popularized by a British author named **N.T. Wright** who said that the Protestant view on justification is all wrong. The correct view is very complicated, only a few

scholars really grasp it – but it basically teaches that *initial* justification is by grace, oh, but *final* justification, God also looks at your works and obedience. You don't *get* saved by works – but you *stay* saved by works. Do you see how this opens the door for adding all sorts of rules and legalism

Let me make this real simple. Wright is wrong. There is no such thing as “initial” and “final” justification. You are justified and saved forever when you trust in Christ and *His* righteousness. Period. Beloved, Paul got it right the first time. His Gospel was and still is, God's Gospel. Reject any other message! And if you don't, if you allow it into your church, watch out because—

- ⁹A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

Legalism spreads like gangrene. People get bored sitting in the pews listening to the same old guy week in week out – and then some new teaching starts going around: “Hey, you really need to watch this teacher on YouTube – wow – this guy sees things in the Bible I never saw before. A group of us are meeting at my house on Tuesday nights to listen to his teachings – keep it on the down-low. . . (no need to tell the pastor. . .)” Oh yes, it happens. Paul wants to think the best of his brothers and sisters—

- ¹⁰I 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. (And then he alludes to a false rumor that apparently had been going around)—
- Galatians 5:11 ¹¹But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

Some of these false teachers were saying that they had even convinced Paul, and Paul was now requiring circumcision too! He says, “That's ridiculous! If that's true, then why am I still being persecuted for preaching grace?”

You won't be persecuted for preaching works-righteousness because that's exactly what people want to hear: “Don't let your pastor tell you that you are so bad that you can't do good things that make you right with God! Only good people will go to heaven, and you look like a candidate!” People will flock to hear that message. But tell them they are helpless, hopeless sinners who can't save themselves, and that only Jesus can save them through the cross – and expect flack. Ishmael will persecute Isaac, right?

And then Paul tells us what he really thinks of these lying false teachers—

- Galatians 5:12 ¹²I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

You get the irony: They like cutting so much – let them finish the job! Then Paul comes back to his main point and how we apply it—

III. True and false freedom (12-15).

- ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers.

Jesus called you in the Gospel. You believed, and were saved, and you are free. And *your Gospel freedom is something you are to use* – put your freedom into service for Christ. He gives two commands, one negative, and one positive—

A. Negative: Don't serve your flesh.

- Only *do not* use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh,

Don't use r "Christian freedom" as an excuse to indulge your own fleshly desires. Paul knows us, doesn't he? He knows that we can twist something good into something that is self-serving—

- *I'll never forget as a baby Christian, trying to figure out what the Christian life was all about – and I was upset because I had seen a Christian rock musician smoking a cigarette. As a new Christian, that just didn't look right to me, so I asked one of my Jesus Freak buddies about it, and he said, "Oh yes, he knows how to enjoy his Christian freedom!" And for a long time I thought that this must be what Christian freedom is all about: freedom to smoke cigarettes!
- Can I tell you: Gospel freedom has *nothing* to do with whether or not you choose to put weeds in your mouth and light them on fire. Do that if you want, but that has zero to do with Gospel freedom! That's not why Jesus died on the cross. You say, "But can I smoke cigarettes and still go to heaven?" And I say, "Yes – and probably sooner!"

Gospel freedom has nothing to do with indulging your own selfish desires. If it's not sinful, then it's a matter of your own conscience before God – and don't let anyone judge you. But remember that your freedom in Christ is freedom *from* sin, not freedom *to* sin. It is freedom from the bondage of your old self-serving desires. Peter said the same thing—

- 1 Peter 2:16 ¹⁶Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

That's the positive use of your freedom—

B. Positive: Do serve others in love.

Let's read it again—

- Galatians 5:13 ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

That is the purpose of our Gospel freedom. It is a gift and a stewardship from God. It's like a currency you have been given that you can spend on serving others in love. Isn't it fun when you have extra money and you use it to bless someone else? That is a happy thing! That's just what Paul means: Jesus set you free from your sinful self-centeredness – so use that freedom to turn your thoughts and prayers, your time and money and energies – to serve one another in love!

- And we see it happen all the time in this church: people *freely* loving on others with meals, cards, meeting physical and emotional and spiritual needs – over the years we have seen people give money, vehicles, even kidneys when needed – and it's all out of the overflow of our

freedom in Christ. “Freely, freely, you have received, freely, freely give!” We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph.1:3) – so we are free to give and serve.

Think about this: before you were saved you had time, money, talents – maybe more than you have now! But you used it to serve yourself because you were enslaved to your own desires. Amen? But then Jesus set you free and you are no longer the old you! All you have belongs to Jesus, and you have the blessed freedom use it all to serve others in love.

And ironically, Paul says that when we do this, we really are keeping the law—

C. Positive: If you serve in love you will fulfill the law.

- Galatians 5:14 ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Beloved, life in the New Covenant is not a life lived by constantly consulting a list of rules, it’s a life of walking by faith in Jesus, and allowing the life of Christ *in you* to overflow through you, on to others. And when you do that, you are fulfilling what God desires of His children—

- Romans 13:8–10 . . . the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

1600 years ago, Augustine summed up the Christian life: “Love – and do what you will.” But Paul closes with a warning—

D. Negative: If you don’t, you will hurt each other.

- ¹⁵But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Where people aren’t freely serving one another in love, they will be *self-serving*, and a church full of self-serving people will be a miserable place! Like a bunch of wild animals, clawing and tearing each other to pieces.” Have you seen it? Amen? Christ calls us to give preference to one another in honor; to consider one another’s need as more important than our own – not to fight for our own rights and desires. In 1 Cor.6, Paul chewed the people out because they were taking other brothers and sisters to secular courts to solve their disputes. He said, “You’ve lost already! Why not rather be defrauded?” I.e., “It’s better to lose your money, and your pride, than to ruin your witness for Christ.”

- A church like that has lost Gospel freedom. Everyone is trying to be seen and heard and noticed for keeping the do’s and don’t’s. People have lost confidence that they are accepted by God because they are in Christ. So they live in guilt and fear, and hypocrisy – judging others, and trying to look spiritual to others when their hearts are far from God.

And they will have rule. Some stated, others unstated, but clearly understood: “If you love Jesus, you will dress this way, you will use this Bible translation, you will attend a home group, you will vote this

way.” And if you do the rules they pat you on the back, if you don’t they judge you and gossip about you. Have you ever seen that?

- Some of our men remember a men’s retreat where the Pastor told the men that mothers are not to work outside the home, and he said if a family came to his church and the mother had a job he would tell them, “You need to look for another church.” I was so proud of our guys. During a Q&A they said, “The Bible doesn’t teach that! That’s not the Gospel!” Now it might be a good thing for a young mom to stay home – but to make a rule that is used to turn people away from church – that is exactly what Paul was warning against. It is unbiblical legalism. Some folks from MBC visited that church and said it was as cold as an iceberg. No wonder! That man was later kicked out of his church (good for those folks), but he started another church, and still teaches the same legalism.

Beloved, when the Son sets you free, you are free indeed! Amen? But use your Gospel freedom to freely love and serve others. Martin Luther summed up this passage—

- “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all.”

And beloved, fight for your Gospel freedom. If you don’t, it will slip from your mind and your heart, and others will try to steal it from you by adding man-made rules and religion. What will keep you free? Again, Martin Luther told us:

- “One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ.”

* * *

For our benediction this morning, I would ask you stand and let’s read as a church family the answer to question 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism—

Q: How are you righteous before God?

A: Only by true faith in Jesus Christ;
 that is, although my conscience accuse me,
 that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God,
 and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil;
 yet God without any merit of mine, of mere grace,
 grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin,
 and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me;
 if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

