

Called to Freedom

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Big Idea: You were called to Freedom in Christ Jesus in order to live out the love of Christ to one another

Opening Illustration:

Back during Easter, I spoke on John 15. Jesus tells his disciples:

John 15:4–6 “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

What could be more appropriate for today's message than

the words of Jesus himself? In today's passage, Paul finally addresses the issue of circumcision directly, and he utilizes the image of circumcision as an illustration of the spiritual reality of the risk the Galatians face. Just as a vine being cut off from the root can bear no fruit so it is for a member cut off from the body cannot have life. The churches of Galatia are at risk of being cut off from the source of life by looking to another source for their life. Through circumcision and the law, the churches of Galatia risk being pruned from the vine; to be cut off from the body of Christ.

We have been set free from the law to live in the freedom of Christ

Galatians 5:1 *ESV*

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

This is where we ended last week. Christ set those who believe in Him free from the bondage to the law for the purpose of being able to live in the freedom of God, but this freedom may not look how you would naturally suspect. Freedom is not the absence of constraint or the ability to do whatever one pleases without consequence. Freedom in Christ is the opportunity and ability to love God through

loving one's neighbor. Freedom in Christ is freedom from the self, not freedom for the self. Christian liberty is freedom for others! Yet before Paul begins to unpack this idea of what freedom in Christ means, he gives a warning:

To hold to the law is to sever from Christ

Galatians 5:2–6 *ESV*

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

Let's identify what Paul means and what he does not mean. Paul doesn't mean that if anyone has their son circumcised in the 21st century that they have cut themselves and their son off from Christ. As we see in Acts 16, Paul allows for Timothy to be circumcised, but that does not mean that Paul and Timothy are cut off from Christ and enslaved again to the law. Whether you have your son circumcised or not is not a spiritual matter but a personal one. Circumcising your son

has no advantage and no profit to you in Christ. But if you do so for the purpose of salvation — for the adult men in the room — if you are circumcised in order to earn favor with God or to seal your salvation, then it is not only of no advantage for you, it is a disadvantage for you, because you have cut yourself off from Christ by taking the matters of salvation into your own hands. To return to the law, to use means of the flesh to earn favor with God is to fall away from grace.

Paul began his instruction to the Galatians in chapter 3 with an appeal to their personal experience in the Holy Spirit. Galatians 3:2–3 “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Is your hope of righteousness in Christ or in yourself?

This is an eschatological question. This is a question about the end times. When we stand before God at final judgment, where is our hope for being declared right before God? Paul gives two options, it is either in yourself or in the Spirit. To accept this act of circumcision would be to reject the all-sufficient, completed work of redemption in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. So one can stand firmly on the hope they have that on the last day, they will be resurrected and declared righteous before God in the Spirit or they may return to pagan rituals that puts them in control of their own

fate and stand before God with their hope in themselves, hope in the flesh. The latter would be hopeless for if one accepts circumcision as a rite of initiation into circumcision, then they become obligated to keep the entirety of the law.

Some may be wondering, why does the rite of circumcision count for nothing, while the sacrament of baptism is required. We don't have this issue of circumcising our children as a salvation issue in the modern church (outside of some Messianic Christian contexts), but we do encourage parents to baptize their children and require baptism for church membership. How is that different? Well, on the one hand both are rites, but circumcision is a rite that places confidence in the flesh. Circumcision is a physical thing that leaves a mark. Baptism on the other hand is a sacramental rite where the washing of water signifies God's spiritual washing of one's sins by grace through faith. Circumcision is in the flesh, while baptism is ultimately a matter of faith. Both are passive, however. In both instances one receives the rite, but whereas the sign of circumcision remains on the body, the sign of baptism only remains on the spirit. Baptism is something spiritual done by faith in obedience to the instruction of Christ Jesus, while circumcision has passed away under the law having been fulfilled in Christ who is the firstborn of creation, cut off for mankind. Circumcision, then, can be seen as a typological shadow to the person of Jesus Christ.

So we see that neither circumcision or uncircumcision counts for anything. Paul was circumcised, the Galatians were not, yet both were saved by the blood of Jesus and filled with the same Spirit. Salvation does not come through the flesh but through the Spirit and that Spirit by faith working through love.

One scholar writes:

Galatians (2) Falling from Grace (5:2-6)

We must guard against the misunderstanding current especially in Catholic theology (though Protestantism is far from exempt) that only faith made perfect in love leads to justification. This represents a serious distortion of the relationship between faith, love, and justification. In speaking of justification Paul never talks of faith and love, but only of faith as receiving. Love is not therefore an additional prerequisite for receiving salvation, nor is it properly an essential trade of faith; on the contrary, faith animates the love in which it works

What Paul is doing here is completing the Christian triad of faith, hope, and love. We have the hope of righteousness by faith and that faith works through love. Not as the result of love. Faith is the root, love is the fruit: Obedience in loving God and one another is not the source of faith, but it is the consequence and outpouring of that faith.

For this reason, we cannot say that I believe that I am going to heaven because I am a good person who is kind to those around me and cause no harm in society. This would rule out the centrality and importance of Jesus Christ. There is only one way to heaven and that is through Jesus Christ. The old adage that God helps those who helps themselves is proven not only false but spiritually devastating. Our only hope in life and death is that we are not our own but exist body and soul to our Lord Jesus Christ.

And our righteousness is not something that we see fully in this life, as we remain sinners in the midst of sanctification. We are not made instantly holy, but we grow in holiness, but our righteousness before God is something that we hope for in the resurrection and hold fast to today in Jesus Christ.

We must remain as branches attached to the vine, abiding in the root of the vine. We must abide in Christ by faith that we may bear fruit, which comes through love. Faith, hope, and love are the fruit of abiding in Christ, but there is no ability to live out faith through love without the blood of the vine coursing through the veins of the branch. The one who is the source of love is the object of faith, so we must not be cut off from our life source.

Shifting analogies, how will you run your race? What will fuel you for the race ahead of you?

Faith or Flesh? How will you run?

Galatians 5:7–12 ESV

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

Paul proceeds to ask why they have deviated from their course. You had been running well when you were running by faith, but why change how you were running?

One thing that is hard to pick up on in English is Paul's use of word play and sense of humor (or maybe rhetorical irony). Paul asked the Galatians who hindered them from the truth, but a literal translation would be, "who has cut you off from being fully persuaded to obey the truth?" Paul plays off of the topic of circumcision to ask who would have them cut off from obedience to the truth of the Gospel of Christ. He concludes this section with the wish that those who attempt

to cut off the Galatians from Christ through circumcision would just go ahead and cut themselves off completely through self-mutilation. (If you know what I mean).

In playing with this concept of cutting off, Paul emphasizes his warning to not be cut off from Christ. Do not be severed from Christ by taking salvation into your own hands, but receive the fullness of Christ through faith.

That is why Paul says that the false brothers are trying to cut them off from obedience to the truth. Paul happens to use the same work twice in this passage. “Obeying the truth” and “I have confidence in the Lord”. In both cases, the word is “to be persuaded.” In the one usage it is a persuasion that leads to following something, or in simple terms, to obey, and the other is to be persuaded that something will hold true, or to have confidence.

Paul desires for the Galatians to remain persuaded by the truth of the Gospel because he is persuaded that through this warning God will hold them firmly in His grasp as the one who originally called them. Paul’s confidence is in the person of Jesus Christ who said that no one will snatch his own from his hand (John 10:28). Paul is confident in the God whose gifts and callings are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). Paul is confident that the one who began a good work in the churches of Galatia will complete it (Phil 1:6). On the flip side, Paul is also confident, that is he is fully persuaded, that

God will cut off these false teachers that they may bear their due penalty.

Once again, Paul defends himself against the charges of the false teachers, who seem to be charging him with teaching the need for circumcision to the Jews but not to the Gentiles. Paul has already defended himself against these sorts of charges in the first two chapters of Galatians, but this time he addresses the charge differently. Paul asks if I still teach circumcision as they accuse me, then why do they persecute me? The cross is made nothing if I do. The cross is not offensive if circumcision is still required because Christ died for no purpose. The offense of the cross has been removed if I still teach circumcision and the law. But Paul does not teach such a thing because Christ is sufficient and in Christ, we are called to freedom.

Called to Freedom

Galatians 5:13–15 ESV

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

In being called to freedom, we are not called to live however

we want to. That would be antithetical to the Gospel. No, in this freedom, we are invited into union with Christ and to live in the freedom of self-sacrificial service to one another. The word “only” here is used to signal a qualification on what Paul has just said about freedom. Freedom in Christ is not a license to live sinfully and abuse grace, but it is the opportunity to stop living for yourself and start living for your neighbor. True freedom is found in taking up your cross daily and following Christ. True freedom is found in loving one another, not in tearing one another down and fighting about who is right or wrong about the color of the carpet or whether there are pews or chairs. It is fulfilling the new commandment of Christ to love one another, that the world around us may know we belong to Christ by how we love one another.

If this idea is not offensive enough to Western sensibilities, Paul does not write to serve one another but to become slaves to one another. In the paradox of the Christian faith, Paul says that you will find yourself by losing yourself; true freedom comes through servitude to the body of Christ. The one who is truly free is the slave of Christ.

You may be asking, but Paul has spent the past two chapters defending the point that the law has been eliminated. We no longer live under the law, but now Paul says that we ought to love one another in the fulfillment of the law? Are we under the law or not!? One commentator provides helpful

insight into this question. In 5:3, Paul emphasizes doing the entire law, while in 5:14, Paul emphasizes fulfilling the whole law. That may not sound very different, but the implications of the language is massive. The doing of the law proceeds righteousness, while the fulfilment of the law is the result of righteousness by the Spirit. The first is by one's own ability and obedience, the second is by the strength of the Holy Spirit in you. It is only by faith in Jesus Christ that one may live out the fulfilment of the law to love one another. Faith is the root; love is the fruit.

Application

Paul emphasizes living in the freedom of Christ as the giving of oneself to love one another. We must live in union with Christ; we must abide in Christ that he may abide in us! We have been called to freedom, but that does not look like the book of Judges where each person did what was right in their own eyes. That may sound like freedom, but it is actually slavery. Freedom is the ability to stop doing what is right in your own eyes, to stop living for yourself, and start living for Christ and for the members of his body. True freedom is found in self-sacrificial service.

Let me leave you with the thoughts of New Testament scholar, Thomas Schreiner:

If you are a husband, you are free to ask yourself, “How can I serve my wife and make her stronger in the Lord” If you are a wife, you ask, “In what ways can I support and affirm my husband, so that he is strengthened spiritually?” And we can all ask: “How can I serve others in the body of Christ? What would the Lord have me do? What can I do with my life that will help others mature spiritually or bring them to faith in Christ?” If you are saying to yourself, “That doesn’t sound like freedom but slavery,” then you don’t know what true freedom is. You are still enslaved to your own selfish desires.

This is a hard application, but let Schreiner’s words sink in for a moment to challenge us to live out the words of Christ and the words of Paul to love one another and love our neighbor as ourselves. And the truth is most if not all of us are going to resonate with the words “that doesn’t sound like freedom.” But that is part of sanctification! That every day we are invited to take up our cross and follow Christ. And one day, we’ll wipe the sweat from our brow and praise God for the freedom we have to serve one another without lamenting the loss of our selfish desires. Abiding in Christ means living for Christ, and it is only there where we will ever experience a life of true freedom.