

“It Is for Freedom”
Galatians 5:1, 13-16, 22-24

Do you like your freedom? We live in a country of great freedom. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom to choose to eat or not eat genetically modified food ... This morning I want us to look at freedom; what we are *free from* and what we are *freed for*. One of the best ways Christians can explain the Good News about Jesus Christ is to talk about freedom.

Our Scripture passage this morning comes from a letter that Paul wrote to a group of Jewish and Gentile Christians throughout the province of Galatia, among churches that he himself helped to plant. Throughout the letter, Paul talks about how God has provided forgiveness and restoration through the death of Jesus – how His sacrifice has set us free not just for a day or for our lifetime, but for eternity. Galatians 5:1 says: “*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*” But freedom from what? What are we free from?

Terry Waite in his book *Taken on Trust* describes being chained to the wall and only allowed to go to the bathroom once a day. He was chained to a radiator for 1,763 days, almost 4 years. We can only imagine the sense of freedom he has now. But imagine that after he was released, he was walking past the building where he had been held, and one of his captors calls him over. He says, “Mr. Waite, won’t you come back again? We will give you a new set of handcuffs, a new chain, a new room and a new radiator to be chained to.” Would Terry go back? Of course he wouldn’t! Would you? Now why would I ask such a question? Simple really – many people have done just that.

Paul says, “*It is for freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*” Yet, as I observe the lives of

people, I see slavery; not freedom. I see people burdened with guilt, bound by fear, enslaved to habits, shackled by attitudes that are far from the freedom of living in Christ.

Yet here, Paul says Jesus has set us free. In John 8:32, Jesus says “The truth will set you free” and 4 verses later he says, “If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed.” Friends, how come Christ has set us free and yet many Christians are still in chains, still shackled by fear, by the flesh, by the world?

In John Bunyan’s book *Pilgrim’s Progress*, there is a point at which Christian’s burden, which he has carried all his life, falls off his back. Anyone remember where this happens? It falls off at the foot of the cross and it rolls into an empty tomb. He never again carries that burden on his back. The burden, by the way, is sin. That is why Christ died – to set us free from the burden of sin!

Isaiah 53:4-5 – “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Plagued by sin, deserving death – and Jesus took it all – freed us from it!

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will ...” add more weight to your load? No, “I will give you rest.” What is the constant refrain coming from the lips of Jesus to the people he came to serve and suffer for? “Come to me and I will remove your burden of sin. I will free you from it.”

This is why Paul warns the Galatians not to put the yoke of the law back on themselves again. False teachers had come along saying, “In order to be saved, you need to be circumcised; you need to observe the ceremonial laws & sacrificial system. To

many, this seemed fine and good. After all, circumcision was a minor medical procedure. But the theological implications were enormous. What Paul says is this: If you believe that circumcision is necessary, then you do not believe that Christ's death on the cross is sufficient to save you from your sins. In fact, you have rejected the gospel of grace and you have gone back to trying to achieve righteousness through your works.

To the one who believed in Yahweh, both the Jew and the Gentile convert, the Law did not spell freedom; it spelt condemnation. Why? Because it convicts us of our sin. That is why lambs were sacrificed again and again, so that an atonement through the shedding of blood could be made on their behalf. The Law brought guilt. It held them in bondage. But when Christ, the Lamb of God, came, he fulfilled the Law's demand as the one and only perfect sacrifice for sin. The burden that we had carried for so long was lifted off of us and placed onto Jesus when he died on that cross to set us free.

So why would the Galatians go back into slavery when they had been freed from bondage. Well, you know it was the pattern of their forefathers, and ours. The people of Israel are led out of the slavery of Egypt; but no sooner are they free than they begin to grumble that life was better back in Egypt.

The Galatians were doing the same. They had allowed the dangerous reasoning of works righteousness to creep its way into their fellowship. There seems to be something in the heart of each man and woman that wants to earn salvation; that wants to contribute something to it. The Word tells us that *we cannot earn salvation, and in trying to do so, we deny the gospel of grace, and the value of the freedom Christ purchased.* [P]

God has called us to freedom in Christ. But Paul also warns us that our freedom must never be used as a license to sin or as a justification for sin. We are free from the condemnation of the Law, but we are not free to disregard the Law. In other words, we are freed from sin, not to sin. Paul gives us an imperative in verse 1: “Stand firm!” That is, use your freedom not to indulge in sin, but to resist the one who tries to ensnare you in it. Stand firm. Why? So that we do not abuse this newfound freedom – so that we do not become burdened once again by a yoke of slavery. Stand firm in the freedom which is in Christ and Christ alone! [Pause]

So we are freed *from* the guilt and condemnation of the Law ... *from* the bondage of sin and the penalty of death. But what are we freed for? What are we free to do? *We are free to enjoy a relationship with God that was once denied to us because of our sin.*

Let me ask you a serious question: Is it a joy to you to be a Christian? I do not mean are you always happy, or on top of the world. I mean is being a Christian a joy to you? There are those who see it is a burden, because they think being a Christian is more about what we shouldn't do, rather than what we are able to do. And now that God has made us a new creation, now that Jesus is the Lord of my life, now that the Holy Spirit resides in me ... we have been freed to live victoriously – lives that make an impact for the sake of the Kingdom! Jesus tells his followers, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly!” Our Savior wants us to have that kind of life – His very life in us! Why? Because He loves us more than you can imagine. You cannot make him love you anymore, and there is nothing you can do which will make him love you any less.

His gift of life is by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone. Your salvation is in Christ – not your obedience. [P] But your sanctification is in your

obedience. Your personal holiness, your witness before God and others, depends on your obedience. Your salvation is all of Christ. Your sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit leading you to obey God's Word so that you might become more like Christ each day. That is what we have been freed for – to pursue and display the likeness of Christ.

What do you have freedom to do? You have freedom to serve your neighbor.

Paul says in verses 13-15 that we have been freed to serve others, not exploit them. *The mark of freedom is servanthood*. It sounds strange, but as we are told, *we are no longer our own; we have been bought at a price* – that price was the very life of Jesus. We are freed from being slaves to sin to become servants of Christ. This is an expression of our love for Christ, the One who has set us free, so that we might serve others in His name.

If we read on to vs. 22, we discover what is replacing the sinful nature in our lives. We are being freed from the power of sin, and in its place comes the fruit of the Spirit. [*Hold up an empty cup*]. How can I get all the air out of this cup? I could get a vacuum pump and suck all the air out, but eventually the cup will be crushed. Or I can do this – fill it with water. *Freedom* in the Christian life is not sucking a sin out here and there, but being *filled by the Holy Spirit* so that there is no room for sin. Cultivating love, joy, peace, patience ... helps us to live into the fullness of our freedom in Christ. That is why Paul says, "*against such things there is no law*" – nothing to condemn. We are free to be filled with the Spirit, and that freedom enables us to be fruitful for Christ.

We are free to live without condemnation of the past. God does not wipe away your sin, give you salvation, and then put on handcuffs of past memories to hinder your Christian life. No, such handcuffs are self-imposed. You are free from your past. It no longer imprisons you. The debt has been paid.

Listen to the words of Peter on the day of Pentecost: “Repent, then, turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19). He sets you free from your past – why would you go back and put on that burden again? [P] Some of us need to accept his forgiveness ... some of us need to take off our self-imposed handcuffs. In Christ, we have freedom from our past.

And we are free to live without the fear of the future. Christ has promised “I will never leave you nor forsake you” & “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” If you look closely at Psalm 23, you’ll see that the sheep does nothing except follow the Shepherd, and, in so doing, is the recipient of blessing after blessing – refreshment, restoration, protection, provision, and greatest of all, the presence of the Lord forever. Not even the shadow of death could deter the Shepherd’s care for His own. We have been freed from the fear of the future.

We are freed to live life rather than dread death. In Christ, we look at death and boldly declare, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” You have been swallowed up in Christ! (1 Cor. 15:55). We have been freed from death so that we might offer life. That is what we have been freed for – to share the living hope we have in Christ to a world dying without it!

In Christ, we have freedom. We are free from the punishment of sin, from eternal death, from the past, from fear of the future. But we are not free to do our own thing. We are not freed from love and concern for others – we are freed in order to live with such love. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”