

Freedom Galatians 5:1-15

Reading: Galatians 5:1-15

Now, if you were to stop someone in the street and ask them to give you one word that summed up Christianity, what do you think they'd say? I could almost guarantee that what they wouldn't say would be *freedom*. And if it was you who were stopped in the street, I suspect you wouldn't either. And, if they looked at you blankly, unable to come up with a word, and you suggested *freedom* as an option, they'd probably reply 'Freedom?? What planet are you from?' Because that's not exactly the popular image of Christianity, is it? Obeying the rules, restricting my freedom, yes, but Christianity = freedom... I don't think so.

And yet that's exactly what Paul says it is.

Don't Lose Your Freedom

Look at v1: 'For freedom Christ has set us free.' Just let Paul's repetition sink in a bit. What has Christ done for you? He's set you free. Why has he set you free? So you can be free. So you can experience and live in the good of freedom.

Now, if you want to break that down, you've got to ask, firstly, 'Ok, but what has Jesus set us free from?' Well, look at the second part of v1: 'Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'

And a yoke is that length of wood that keeps an animal, like an ox, in line, or that slaves or workers would wear, from which heavy loads could be hung. It's a picture of your life being under the control of another, of you having to do hard labour. And Paul says, Jesus has set you free from just such a yoke of slavery. And in the context of this letter he's talking about the belief that you've got to obey the law of Moses to be saved. That you've got to be circumcised, you've got to obey the rules, you've got to make the grade, you've got to live a morally upright life, if you are to stand any chance of earning God's acceptance. And that's a yoke of slavery because, if that's what you think you've got to do, you're going to end up weighed down by guilt and condemnation for all the times you fail. But Jesus has set you free from that, Paul says.

So, if by some chance you were asking people on the streets of Galatia for a one word summary of Christianity, and you just happened to bump into Paul, he wouldn't hesitate to say, 'freedom! For freedom, Christ has set us free!'

But what I want you to see is that little word 'again' that Paul slips in here. Verse 1, 'Do not submit *again* to a yoke of slavery.' And that's interesting because these Galatians weren't Jewish, they hadn't already been following the Jewish law, or else there wouldn't have been all this discussion about circumcision. They were pagans before they became Christians. And yet, here is Paul saying, listen, Jesus has set you free from slavery, don't go back to slavery.

Which means that Paul is saying that a religion of scrupulously keeping the rules is no better than paganism. It doesn't matter whether you're running after and worshipping the gods of wealth, or sex, or power, or health, or you're a highly religious, upright moral person - trying to obey the rules - both are enslaved. Both are trying to earn favour with God or the gods, both are trying to prove

themselves. Both are wracked by pride because they think they're better than others, or insecurity, because they know they're not. It doesn't matter whether you're a Jewish law keeper, or a pagan idol worshipper, a highly moral conservative or an out and out liberal, both are enslaved by the drive to perform, to prove yourself, to earn and win acceptance.

And Paul is saying, Christ has set you free from that. That's how you used to live when you were pagans - don't go back to that by following religious rule keeping. Instead he says, v1, 'stand firm' - stay on your guard, keep watch, resist. Because, whilst you can't lose your salvation, you can lose the freedom your salvation in Christ brings.

And just think how that works. You become a Christian and you know 'I am saved by God's grace, I don't deserve it, but out of his grace and love he's rescued me and set me free, regardless of my performance.' But after a while you begin to think, 'ok, that was then, but now, to stay in God's good books, I've got to earn his approval. Or, I've failed in this way or that way, so I'd better try and make it up, I've got to try and work my way back in favour with God.'

And Paul says thinking like that is like a condemned man who's been set free creeping back into prison and chaining himself up again. It's like a slave who's been granted his freedom, going back to his slave master's house, finding his old chains, and putting them round his wrists and ankles again. Doesn't matter whether it's running after the idols of the world, or trying to be really religious, trying to earn the favour of God, the gods, or others, is slavery.

Now, some actions have consequences, don't they? Park your car illegally and you'll get a ticket. Sneeze into your hand, and no one wants to shake it. Well, look at v2, 'Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.' In other words, there's a type of religion, that might seem outwardly Christian, but where Jesus is of zero value, because ultimately it's not Jesus someone's trusting, it's them being good enough.

But it's not just that you don't *need* to earn God's favour - you can't, Paul says. It's a project doomed to failure. Look at v3, 'I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.' You see, it's not as simple as just saying, 'if I just get circumcised I'll be acceptable to God.' Because if that's what you think, you think salvation comes by obeying the law, because it's the law that tells you you need to be circumcised. Well, then, Paul says, it's not just one law in the law you need to obey, it's all of them, and who can do that?

It's why Paul says in v4 that if they go down this path, they're severed from Christ, they've fallen from grace.

And that is what they were in danger of doing. Look at v7: 'You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?' These Galatians had got off to a flying start in their Christian lives, they knew they had been saved by grace and by putting their trust in Jesus and not themselves, they were running well, but now someone's cut them up, someone's jostling them off the track, someone's trying to trip them up. And it's these false teachers telling them, 'yes, Jesus is great, it's great you believe in him, but there's still more you need to do to be really acceptable to God.'

And in response Paul says in v12, 'I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves.' They're trying to mutilate your bodies, well, I wish they'd go the whole way and mutilate themselves, totally. They want you to cut a bit off yourselves, well, I wish they'd cut the lot off.

It's strong stuff, isn't it? Has Paul lost it? No - he just gets the seriousness of what's going on in their lives. He gets what the long term impact will be on someone's life if they think, 'I've got to earn God's approval, his smile on my life - by being circumcised, or wearing the right clothes, or not going to the wrong places, or having a long enough quiet time.' It becomes slavery.

And yet, there's a danger here. I've taught each of my girls to drive and each time we've started off on the small farm roads around our village. The problem is, those roads are narrow, and on each side there's a ditch and a field. And when one of them starts veering off on one side heading for a ditch you have to get them to correct course, but then they're in danger of over-correcting and ending up in the ditch on the other side.

And Paul's been warning them against the ditch of thinking they've got to earn God's favour. But in avoiding that ditch, he knows they might just end up in another.

What Not to Do with Your Freedom

So if Paul starts this chapter by telling them 'don't lose your freedom', he then tells them 'don't abuse it.'

Look at v13: 'For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.' And by *flesh* Paul doesn't mean our skin and bone, he means our fallen human nature. That natural disposition inside each one of us to put 'me' first, to pursue what I want, even, especially, if that runs against how God wants me to live.

And the danger of hearing that God loves you and accepts you, and counts you right with him because of Jesus, and not anything to do with your performance, is that you could think, 'hey, if that's the case, if I've been set free from rule-keeping, I can live however I want.'

And, let's just be honest, it's not hard to see how that could catch on, is it? To let you be the defining moral compass of your life. That you can pursue whatever you want out of life. Because, if my standing before God doesn't rest on me being highly moral, or observing someone else's rules, then obviously I can live just how I want. I can sleep with my boyfriend or girlfriend. I can watch what I want to watch. I can spend my money how I want to spend it. I can let my frustrations boil over into anger, if I feel like it. I can eat or drink more than I should. Because, as Heinrich Heine, the German poet said on his deathbed: 'God will forgive me, that's his job.' If there's no condemnation, no fear, no guilt of doing what's wrong, just freedom, then I can live just how I want.

But what's interesting is that while Paul says, don't use your freedom to indulge the flesh, he doesn't say, 'instead you should obey God's law!'. Instead he says, 'listen, when you understand all that Jesus has done for you, you *can* live just how you want, because what you want is going to radically change.'

What to Do with Your Freedom

So far in Galatians Paul's taught us that we are united with Christ by faith, we've been crucified with him and we live in him and Christ lives in us - that salvation and righteousness is all by faith - by putting our trust in Jesus and not in ourselves. But he doesn't then say, so you can forget about

the law, or, having been saved, you've got to obey the law. Instead, he says, it's precisely through faith in Christ that we'll fulfil the law.

That, far from our freedom from guilt, and condemnation, and always trying to perform, leading us to live self-pleasing lives, that freedom leads us to live God pleasing lives, because we want to.

Look at v5: 'For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.' Now, in English, when we say that we hope something is going to happen, we basically mean, 'I want it to happen, but deep down I know it's not going to'. 'I hope we manage to pull that deal off, but it's 50-50.' 'I hope the sun's going to shine today, but I'm English, so it'll probably rain.' But when the Bible talks about hope it's talking about something that you fully expect to happen. And you can live your life now knowing that it's going to happen.

So, when Paul talks about the hope of righteousness, he's talking about that final, total acceptance and vindication by God that his people are going to enjoy at the end of time - when he declares all of us right in his sight and the whole universe gets to see it.

And Paul says that through the Spirit, by faith we wait for that. We know it's true, we know that's how God sees us now, and that he always will, we're just waiting for the day when we get to experience it in full. We wait for it. *Not* work for it. We don't sit anxiously thinking, have I done enough? What more do I need to do to make sure God accepts me? We wait. And we wait eagerly - on the edge of our seats, because we know, by faith, that day is coming.

And that means that you live now, knowing that that is true of you. Every morning you can get up, go to the office, start your studies, do stuff around the home, knowing, I am already accepted, I am already loved, chosen, accepted, adopted by my heavenly Father, and today I'm going to live in the good of that. That is true of me now, and it always will be. Not because I behave myself, not because I am faithful to God, but because God is faithful to me.'

And that faith in Christ - of what he has done for us, changes the way we live, from a life of self-pleasing self-love to one of loving others. Verse 6: 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.'

In other words, it doesn't matter whether you're a religious rule-keeper or totally pagan; doesn't matter whether you're highly moral or totally liberal, in Christ it's not about your performance- how moral or how tolerant you are. Your religious practices can be going really well; or you can be falling flat on your face, neither of those will make God love you more or less than he does in Christ. It counts for nothing. It's trusting Christ that matters, and that faith working its way out in love.

You see, to eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness, means to think, to meditate, to ponder, even to sing about all that Christ has done for you. And as you do that, the way you live is going to increasingly come into line with what is already true for you. And your faith is going to work its way out, not in acts of selfishness, but in acts of loving self-sacrifice.

You see, neither the religion that says you've got to obey the rules to be acceptable to God, or the irreligion that throws off the rules, can ever make you someone who lives out of love, because you'll always be living for yourself: either to earn angel points with God, or because you think

pleasing yourself is the only way to happiness. It's only by knowing you are already deeply loved and accepted because of Jesus that can give you the self-forgetfulness and security to sacrificially love. Because you've got nothing to prove or lose.

Look again at v13-14: '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 neighbour as yourself."'

Interesting isn't it? As a Christian, Jesus has set you free, free to become a servant. Free from pursuing your own self-interest to serve others out of love for them. You see, Jesus said that the law could be summed up by two commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. And when he says that, he and Paul here with him, is quoting Leviticus 19:18. That the commandments - like the 10 commandments - against stealing someone else's stuff, or committing adultery against your husband or wife, or being eaten up by jealousy of what someone else has and you don't, they can all be summed up by 'love your neighbour as yourself'.

And Jesus sets you free to be able to do just that because you know that through his suffering and death and resurrection, he has sacrificially loved and served you even though you don't deserve it. It's what Paul calls in v11, 'the offence of the cross' - that the Son of God would love and die for people like us. And the more you think about that, the more you let the gospel shape you, the more it will undermine your self-centredness, or your pride, or your insecurity, that drives your living for yourself, and you find yourself loving him and others in response.

And because that's the impact of the gospel on your life, it'll also change the way you talk about others. Verse 15: 'If you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.' Sadly, religion has this power to turn someone into a person who attacks, and criticises and speaks harshly of others - because if you need to prove you're ok, that you're moral, it helps to have people who aren't as good as you, who you can look down on. But if you live like that, it ends up consuming you, Paul says.

The gospel does something far better. The more you think about it, and ponder it, the more you realise how undeserving you are, but that Christ has set you free, the more your heart swells with love for Christ, and the more your heart moves towards others, not in accusation, but in acts of loving service.

And that means you will fulfil the law in far greater ways than will ever happen if you think you've got to obey it to be acceptable.

In Psalm 119:32 the psalmist says, 'I will run in the way of your commandments for you set my heart free!' Let's do the same. Let's be a church not of biting criticism, but of loving self-sacrifice, because we know Christ has set us free.