

Gal. 5:1-12

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“The Gospel and Freedom”

Introduction

Without a doubt, the core theme of the Epistle to the Galatians is the gospel. However, there is another theme that appears just as frequently as the gospel throughout this letter: freedom. This is why some scholars have given Galatians the moniker "The Declaration of Freedom in the Gospel," or the "Magna Carta of Spiritual Liberty."

Are you currently enjoying the freedom and joy that the gospel proclaims? Or are you wrestling in darkness, unfamiliar with what that gospel-driven freedom and joy even feel like? If our walk of faith has degenerated into a dry, repetitive cycle of religious duties and obligations rather than the vibrant freedom and joy given by the gospel, then our lives are fundamentally inconsistent with the testimony of Scripture. If that is the case, we cannot help but ask ourselves: Why are we failing to fully enjoy the freedom that the gospel has purchased for us?

It seems the Galatian believers were wrestling with this exact same struggle and anxiety. Therefore, the Apostle Paul writes to remind them of the freedom found in the gospel, urging them to strive to protect and enjoy it. Through today's message, we will examine what the freedom of the gospel truly means, what it looks like in practice, and why protecting and enjoying this freedom is absolutely vital to our Christian life. It is my prayer that every one of us will move beyond mere religious routine and truly encounter, rejoice in, and live out the reality of that gospel freedom in our daily lives.

Christian Freedom

Verse 1 of today's passage is a glorious declaration of what our salvation is ultimately for: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). The Apostle Paul explicitly declares that the very purpose for which Christ redeemed us is "for freedom." However, to properly grasp the depth of this statement, we must first understand exactly what kind of freedom Paul is talking about.

What is freedom? In our worldly thinking, we often treat freedom as a synonym for human free will. We think of freedom as the ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want, and to possess whatever we desire without any restriction or interference.

However, the freedom proclaimed in Scripture operates on an entirely different dimension. Biblical freedom is a freedom purchased by Christ and found exclusively in Christ. When verse 1 states that Christ has set us free, it carries the sobering

implication that prior to knowing Christ, we were not free at all. Outside of Christ, we were utterly devoid of freedom. To some, the phrase "in Christ" might sound like a restriction, but it is precisely the opposite. Many theologians use the analogy of a fish and water to describe this reality. A fish is only truly free when it is in the water. Why? Because that is how its nature was designed by the Creator. If that fish demands the "freedom" to live on dry land or in some other liquid, that is not freedom—it is captivity and immediate death. In the same way, our true freedom is inextricably bound to our created nature. Scripture tells us that we were created in the image of God. Because we bear His image, the only place where we can experience absolute freedom is within the presence and fellowship of God.

However, after the fall of Adam, the immediate spiritual reality that enveloped a corrupted humanity was a desperate attempt to flee from the presence of God. Scripture describes this fallen human condition as being in legal bondage to sin, death, and Satan. The primal sin of Adam and Eve was an attempt to declare independence from God. Sin always begins with a departure from Him. In this sense, every human being outside of Christ is a slave. No matter how autonomous they may appear outwardly, their spiritual reality is that of a severed branch withering away from the vine. The testimony of Scripture is clear: they are living as children of wrath, serving Satan, the father of lies. The Old Testament repeatedly shows that life apart from God is nothing but a futile attempt to cistern water from broken wells. The Divine Law exposes our miserable inability to deliver ourselves from our captivity to sin and death. This tragic reality of the unregenerate mind is perfectly captured in Romans 1:28: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." This reveals that the freedom unbelievers claim to enjoy is a complete illusion. The "freedom" to live according to their own sinful desires is actually the ultimate evidence of their bondage to sin and a manifestation of God's present judgment. This was once our own miserable reality before we knew Christ.

But then, the gospel broke through! The gospel is the historic event of liberation whereby God sets His covenant people free from their bondage to sin, death, and Satan. How was this accomplished? To borrow the language of Galatians: when the fullness of time had come, Jesus Christ—the eternal Son of God—took on human flesh, was born of a woman, and was born under the law. By perfectly fulfilling every requirement of the law, He became the righteousness of all who believe. On the cross, He bore the full weight of the law's curse and the wrath of divine judgment, thereby redeeming us from sin. What is the magnificent gospel reality accomplished through this? He has brought us to live "in Christ." It is the cosmic event where the withered branch is grafted into the True Vine, and the suffocating fish is returned to the vast ocean. Gospel freedom is life lived in Christ.

The rich grace and freedom we enjoy in Christ is masterfully articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (20.1):

"The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law. But, under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of."

Look at how extraordinarily vast this freedom is, which Jesus purchased for us under the gospel! The Confession states that He has freed us from "the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law." For those who are in Christ Jesus, there is now absolutely no condemnation. Because Christ took the full curse of the law upon Himself, no curse remains for us. This is our definitive, forensic declaration of freedom. It declares that we are "delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin." The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ shattered the dominion of sin and decisively defeated Satan. Therefore, we are no longer slaves to the devil. Sin no longer has mastery over us. It assures us that we are delivered "from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation." This guarantees our future glory. Our ultimate destiny is to be conformed to the glory of Christ. As the firstfruits of the resurrection, Christ has validated this reality. No affliction, no death, and no grave can hold us, and the judgment of eternal damnation has completely passed over us through His cross. Our past, present, and eternal future are perfectly secure in His hands.

Yet, the crowning beauty of Christian freedom is found in these words: "...in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind." In Christ, we have been fully reconciled to God. We are restored to the very purpose for which we were created: to delight in God and enjoy Him forever. This is a life that was completely unimaginable when we were outside of Christ. We have been rescued from the distorted, self-centered life of egoism and invited into a life of genuine love and freedom—where we know who God is, marvel at His grace, and pour out that love toward our neighbors.

This reminds us that gospel freedom is inextricably linked to divine love. The decisive reason why the gospel is synonymous with freedom is that it is fundamentally a gospel of love. The degree to which we experience this freedom is directly proportional to our understanding of the breadth, length, depth, and height of the love of God. As we have seen, an astonishing heavenly reality has already been unveiled in our lives. We are pardoned from the guilt of all past, present, and future sins. Sin and death have lost their grip on us. We are bound to the unbreakable love of God, who sovereignly works all things together for our ultimate good and His eternal glory.

If such an immense spiritual reality has been given to us, why do we still fail to enjoy it? Why do we still anxiously worry, doubt, and fall into despair? It is because we still fail to fully believe the sheer magnitude of God's love. If we do not comprehend the manner of love the Father has lavished upon us, our Christian walk will inevitably degenerate back into another form of religious slavery.

What can we possibly add to or subtract from a God who loves us with an infinite love? In human relationships, a single mistake can ruin a bond and turn friends into enemies. Is the love of God like that? No. Infinite love cannot fluctuate. Adding to it or subtracting from it is a mathematical impossibility. It is a love that does not belong to this world. And yet, Scripture declares that this is precisely how He has loved us. Because our finite minds struggle to comprehend this infinite devotion, God gave us the ultimate, undeniable proof of His love: the Cross. It is the cosmic event where God the Father did not spare His uniquely beloved Son, but gave Him up for us all. It is the event where God the Son, out of perfect love for the Father and for us, willingly laid down His life. It is the work of God the Holy Spirit, who applies this great redemption to our hearts. The love we have received is a Trinitarian love manifested at Calvary. If we truly believe in the love of Him who did not withhold His own Son, what could we possibly fear? (Romans 8:32). If that love compels us, and if we truly recognize the magnitude of the forgiveness we have received, whom could we possibly refuse to forgive, and whom could we fail to love? (Luke 7:47). The gospel bears witness to an unsearchable, infinite love of God, and it boldly decrees that you and I are the beneficiaries of this love. Only when we truly know this gospel can we live like fish returned to the deep ocean—fully free to enjoy God and fully free to love others. This is why the Apostle Paul never failed to pray for one specific thing for the churches: that they would deeply comprehend the love of God. For it is only when we rightly know the love of Christ and love Him in return, that we are liberated from all fear and transformed into citizens of heaven who count all worldly glories as rubbish compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Him.

The Threats of Legalism

There is an ancient and enduring enemy that constantly threatens the gospel we believe and the freedom we enjoy. That enemy is legalism. Today, Paul exposes the grave danger of legalism by centering his argument on the issue of circumcision.

Look at verse 2: "Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." (Gal. 5:2) Paul's stance here is uncompromising; it is a matter of absolute binary choice. He declares that if they choose circumcision, they render Christ utterly useless to them. Furthermore, he drops a terrifying warning in verse 4, stating that those who attempt to be justified by the law are "severed from Christ" and have "fallen away from grace."

The Galatians sitting under Paul's instruction were Gentile Christians who genuinely considered themselves believers. Why, then, was Paul compelled to issue such a severe, stark, and uncompromising warning to them?

This was not empty rhetoric meant to induce psychological terror. Nor was Paul suggesting that a true believer can lose their eternal security. Rather, Paul was forced to speak this way because the religion of legalism—symbolized here by receiving circumcision—and the gospel of Jesus Christ are two fundamentally incompatible religions. In Paul's eyes, any religious system that attempts to synthesize circumcision with Christ is a human fabrication, not the word of God. As we have noted repeatedly, circumcision was the ultimate shorthand for the works of the law. Imbedded within the demand for circumcision was the toxic message that faith in Christ is insufficient, and that we must complete our own salvation through legalistic performance. This framework actually aligns far more with first-century Judaism than with biblical Christianity. Covenantal Judaism believed in grace—it taught that Israel was chosen by God's sovereign grace—but it insisted that one must maintain and secure that salvation by keeping the law. For them, grace was partial; the deficit had to be paid by human performance.

Paul understood better than anyone that this was a completely different "gospel." He had once been a premier champion of that very system. Drawing from Scripture and his own radical conversion, Paul warns that attempting to achieve righteousness through the law will only drag them back into spiritual slavery. To be justified by the law, one must keep every single dot and iota perfectly—a standard that no fallen human being has the capacity to meet. Therefore, returning to the law yields nothing but a divine curse.

At this point, we must ask a searching question: Why are our hearts so naturally magnetically drawn to legalism? Had Paul failed to teach them otherwise? Surely, he had taught them the gospel countless times. Yet, the Galatians quickly drifted. Why?

Because love and grace cannot be reduced to a mechanical formula. When our souls fail to intimately know the love of God revealed in the gospel, we instinctively try to smuggle our own merits, credentials, and value into the economy of salvation. Legalism is simply the natural human mind translating God's supernatural gospel into a transactional human system. At the root of the legalistic heart is a spiritual elitism that assumes God's love belongs only to those who have achieved a certain level of worthiness. The service of a legalist is subtly laced with a dangerous mindset of merit: "Since I am sacrificing and serving to this degree, doesn't God owe me His love?"

But what does the gospel of Jesus Christ declare? It ruthlessly excludes all human merit. It heralds a dramatic love that sought us out while we were still helpless sinners and enemies of God (Romans 5:8). It declares that before the bar of God's free grace, there is absolutely no distinction between the affluent and the impoverished, the highly educated and the unlearned, the socially reputable citizen and the perpetrator of unimaginable crimes. Our deep-seated human pride revolts against this reality. The flesh screams that this is unfair. But such thinking is entirely carnal. It is the perspective of a person who judges strictly by outward appearances, totally blind to the sheer magnitude of the grace, love, and freedom we have actually received.

The ultimate tragedy of legalism is that it forces a person's gaze to remain entirely fixated upon themselves, blinding them to the only Savior who can actually deliver them. Legalists possess no deep contentment or satisfaction in Christ because they have never truly looked at Him. This is why Paul states that legalists are severed from Christ. When we look at Christ, we behold the heart of the Father, who did not spare even His most precious Possession for us. When we look at Christ, we see the One who perfectly accomplished everything necessary for our salvation and who, by uniting us to Himself through faith, supernaturally supplies our every spiritual need. Everything we need is found in Christ. When we live apart from Him—when we look away from His face—we will inevitably attempt to fill that spiritual vacuum with the futile, exhausting strivings of our own flesh. That is the ugly reality of legalism.

Life in Christ: A Life Enjoying Freedom

In contrast to legalism, Paul beautifully articulates the true life of freedom that a Christian experiences under the reign of grace: "For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness." (Galatians 5:5, ESV) The Christian life is a reality initiated solely by the Holy Spirit. Through the supernatural sovereign work of the Spirit in regeneration, we have been granted the eyes of faith to behold Jesus Christ. With those eyes of faith, we now eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

What is this "hope of righteousness"? It is none other than Jesus Christ Himself, for He alone is our perfect, counting righteousness. Furthermore, this hope points to the ultimate consummation of our salvation. As stated previously, the freedom we enjoy in this life is directly proportional to our apprehension of God's grace and Christ's love. Yet, our progressive sanctification in this fallen world has definite, painful limitations. We find ourselves unable to comprehend His love or to love Him back as deeply as our renewed hearts desire.

Therefore, that which every true believer intensely longs for is the heavenly moment when our salvation is fully consummated, and the perfect righteousness of Christ becomes visually and completely ours. It will be the moment when our understanding of Christ's love is made perfect, entirely unhindered by the presence of indwelling sin, enabling us to love Him purely in return. This will be realized at the glorious second coming of Christ. To live waiting for the hope of righteousness, then, is to live with our eyes fixed upon Jesus, eagerly awaiting His return.

In verse 6, Paul captures the very summit and absolute essence of the Christian life and its freedom: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6, ESV) If we were to summarize the Christian life in a single phrase, it is faith working through love. And at the dead center of this reality is, once again, beholding Jesus Christ. Faith acts much like a pair of spectacles. The sole purpose of glasses is to enable a person to see something clearly. No matter how expensive or sturdy a pair of glasses may be, if they fail to bring the objective reality into focus, they are utterly useless. The gift of faith we received through the Holy Spirit is precious beyond measure precisely because it enables us to look upon Christ. It is only when we gaze upon Christ that our hearts are filled to the brim with the infinite love of God. Moreover, the love of Christ is far too immense to be contained within our fragile human vessels. It must, by its very nature, overflow our cups and flood into the lives of those around us. This is the heartbeat of the Christian existence: Waiting for Christ by faith, beholding Christ by faith, and thereby manifesting that overflowing, transcendent love toward God and our neighbors.

When our hearts are captivated by beholding Christ and saturated with His love, the natural, inevitable fruit is obedience to the Word of God. This obedience is born out of profound gratitude, unspeakable joy, and genuine love. It is no longer performed to earn human recognition or to secure divine acceptance; rather, it is a free, voluntary obedience offered from a willing heart. This is precisely why a person possessing true, saving faith can never drift into antinomianism (lawlessness). True believers keep the commandments of God—not because they think it profits their standing before Him, but because they love Him. They naturally hate sin, because they know that sin grieves

their Savior and disrupts their sweet communion with Him. Those who truly understand the scandalous cost of grace refuse to cheapen it or waste it on reckless living. Instead, they strive with all their might to love Him entirely. Their only sorrow is that they cannot give Him more, that they cannot obey Him more perfectly. Yet, even in this shortfall, they do not fall into despair; rather, they persevere in a lifestyle of obedience with deep thanksgiving. This is the true, sublime freedom that belongs exclusively to the Christian: the freedom of one who loves. It is the reality of being completely free, and using that very freedom to love.

The Gospel: The Pillar of the Church

Herein lies the most crucial reason why the Church must fiercely guard the gospel: the gospel is the only conduit through which we encounter the true Christ, who alone grants us liberty.

The collapse of a church never happens because of a lack of better programming, superior music, or more palatable, seeker-friendly messages. The decay of the Church has historically and invariably begun when the gospel is compromised. When the gospel is obscured, the grace of God recedes from view. And when that grace is gone, nothing remains but the dead husk of human religion. Therefore, Paul urgently exhorts the Galatians in verse 7 to guard the gospel they received. He boldly anathematizes any other message, declaring that any alternative gospel is not from God (v. 8). He warns them in verse 9 that error cannot be tolerated, for "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." Paul even uses shockingly severe language in verse 12, wishing that the false teachers who were agitating them would not merely stop at circumcision but would go all the way to mutilating—or castrating—themselves, cutting themselves off entirely from the body of believers. Does Paul's rhetoric sound excessively harsh to your ears? It will not, if we truly comprehend the cosmic stakes of the gospel.

Guarding the gospel is an arduous battle. In verse 11, Paul describes this difficulty as "the offense of the cross." The word "offense" in the Greek text is *skandalon*, from which we derive our English word scandal. The gospel is inherently offensive to the fallen world. In the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures of the first century, the cross was treated as a curse word, an execution device so shameful it was not to be mentioned in polite society. This is why Paul writes in another epistle that the gospel is foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews. When the gospel is proclaimed in its uncompromised purity, persecution and suffering will inevitably follow. The world hates our Savior because it loathes having its darkness exposed by His light. Yet, Paul resolved to boast in nothing except the cross. It was the only true gospel entrusted to him. He proclaimed the gospel of *Sola Gratia* (grace alone) and *Sola Fide* (faith alone), because this gospel alone drives us to Christ, and in Christ alone is true, unshakable freedom found.

Conclusion

It is my deepest pastoral longing that every one of us would truly comprehend the gospel and live in the fullness of its freedom. If you have heard the gospel dozens or hundreds of times, yet you still find yourself devoid of this spiritual liberty, I plead with you to cry out to God to grant you an intimate, heart-transforming knowledge of His love and grace. If that cry is already groaning within your soul, take heart, for the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit has already begun in you. Perhaps there are some among us who once tasted the joy of looking upon Christ by faith and knew the freedom of the gospel, but have since allowed their gaze to be hijacked by the world and their own performance, drifting back into the slavery of legalism. If that is you, turn your eyes back to Jesus Christ immediately. To behold Him clearly, draw near to and diligently employ the Ordinary Means of Grace—the faithful preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and prayer. Be fiercely vigilant against anything that blurs your spiritual vision or diverts your gaze from Him. Hold fast to a life of looking unto Christ as your ultimate lifeline. Christ, the supreme Object of our faith, will never fail you.

As a church, I issue this charge to all our saints: though persecution, misunderstanding, and affliction may come our way, we must boast in the cross of Christ alone. The ultimate outcome of the harvest does not rest on our frail shoulders. Listen to Paul's voice of absolute, covenantal confidence in verse 10: "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." (ESV) Paul was profoundly confident that, in the end, the Galatians would reject heresy and stand firm in the true gospel. Why was he so sure? Because he knew the Author of the message. He knew that the Lord who calls, establishes, protects, and preserves His covenant people is a God who is utterly incapable of failure. He will safely bring His sheep to their heavenly home. Meanwhile, the false teachers who distort His truth and the world that opposes it will inevitably face His righteous judgment. I preach this word to you today with that exact same theological certainty. Our God will never fail to save His elect people. The very same Holy Spirit who sustained the Apostle Paul and the Galatian saints indwells us this afternoon, enabling us to fix our eyes of faith on the same Lord Jesus Christ. Keep your eyes locked onto Christ and run the race of faith set before you with endurance. Keep running until that magnificent, long-awaited day of glorification arrives—until our faith shall turn to sight, and we shall look upon our Savior face-to-face, experiencing the absolute, unhindered fullness of His infinite and eternal love!

