

# LIVING IN FREEDOM

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*Galatians 5:1-15*

## Introduction:

### Illust. – THE FIRST SENTENCE

Paul Harvey once told about a group of scientists who were determined to teach a chimpanzee to write. For fourteen years, the scientists labored diligently and patiently with this chimpanzee, providing things in its cage to enable it to form certain syllables. Finally the day arrived when it seemed that the chimpanzee was actually going to construct a sentence from the symbols it had been learning. Word went out, and other scientists crowded into the room and gathered around the cage. The scientists could hardly contain themselves as they pressed around the cage to read the history-making sentence. This is what the chimpanzee wrote: "Let me out!"

Freedom—isn't that what we all want? In Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, he emphasizes over and over the truth that we are free in Christ. The Gentile believers in these churches were being pressured by some men from Jerusalem to submit themselves to the OT Jewish Law, insisting that unless they were circumcised and observed the requirements of the Law they could not be complete in their walk with God.

Over the past number of weeks we have followed Paul's arguments and we have seen the depth of Paul's love and concern for these new believers. He is both frustrated and distressed at hearing about what has happened in these churches. He had trouble believing that they would so quickly be drawn away from the truth into the error of legalism and depending on the Law as a means of satisfying God's righteous requirements.

He says in chapter 3, "You came to Christ by faith. You put your trust in Jesus' work on the cross in order to have your sins forgiven. Are you now going to try to complete your salvation and live out your life as a Christian by your own efforts? If you could not save yourself what makes you think that you have the ability to keep yourself saved?"

That is the real crux of the matter. Our Christian life is based on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is His work from beginning to end.

We are saved by faith and we must live by faith. It is that idea of living by faith that we come to in this part of Paul's letter. We just read the first 15 verses of chapter 5. There is another change in Paul's approach as we get into this section.

Chapters 1-2 were fairly personal words from Paul as he defended the authority of his apostleship and the authenticity of his message. He used historical evidence from his life to show that he could not have received his message from the other apostles. Rather it came by direct revelation from God. However he also showed how the other apostles had accepted and endorsed his message and commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. (Key verses – 1:11-12)

Chapters 3-4 were filled with doctrinal teaching as Paul went through a number of arguments and illustrations from the life of Abraham himself to show that as believers we are not under the law but under grace. In fact his argument is that the law cannot bring produce righteousness, but rather brings a curse. The law was put in place as a means of bringing us to Christ. (Key verses – 3:23-25)

Now in chapters 5-6 Paul moves into another area. His focus here is very practical. What does it mean to live in freedom? This is where, as we sometimes say, the rubber meets the road. These chapters are filled with practical exhortations about living a life of freedom in Jesus Christ. Our text today is kind of a transitional passage and Paul gives some final reminders and challenges while moving into the practical aspects of living life in the Spirit.

There are three paragraphs in our text today. In the first, Paul reminds the Galatian believers of the danger of false doctrine, and how it can lead you away from grace. In the second, the warning is about the threat of false teachers, who will corrupt everything they contact. The third paragraph, vv. 13-15, teach us the value of true Christian liberty. So let's look at what he has to say.

## I. The Danger of False Doctrine      vv. 1-5

Verse 1 is the rallying cry of this whole epistle. You have been called to freedom. Stand firm in that freedom and don't get sucked back into bondage to the law.

One of the great dangers in Paul's mind was that these Galatian believers might think that it is not a big deal if they give in to the Judaizer's demand that they be circumcised. Maybe it would even raise their status before God, if they obey this one command. But look at what Paul says in vv. 2-3 – read them.

Paul knew that circumcision itself was not really the issue. He says that in v. 6 and we will look at that later on. But the issue was the false notion that somehow their standing before God would be enhanced or hindered by their willingness to be circumcised. But Paul knew that to take that step was to then make themselves accountable for the whole law.

And that would have dangerous consequences. Look at vv. 4-5. What a contrast. If you are looking to the law, both the moral law and the ceremonial law, as a means of impressing God or attaining his favor, you have just removed yourself from grace. That is a very precarious situation to be in.

God, in his grace, has done it all. He has provided everything for our salvation and our Christian life. His grace has provided what we do not deserve and could never earn—forgiveness, righteousness, eternal life. To turn to the works of the law, is to turn away from His grace, saying, thanks but I think I can do it myself. What an insult that is to God.

To treat the grace of God in this way is like receiving a gift of great value from a friend, who has no other motive or desire than to see your joy in possessing it; then spending the rest of your life trying to earn it or pay for it. That is an insult to the giver.

Paul says that to turn to the law is to fall from grace. The word he uses in this text implies destroying the effectiveness of it. By looking to the keeping of the Law to satisfy God is to make the grace of God of no effect. It is the exact opposite of Paul's own testimony in 2:21 – read it.

So the whole danger in this false doctrine that has crept into the Galatian church is that it is causing these believers to abandon the grace of God by which they had come to Christ, in order to earn their standing before God by their own efforts.

Ultimately the truth in this section is that we are free from the Law.

## II. The Threat of False Teachers vv. 7-12

We are going to skip over v. 6 for the moment. We will come back to it in our third point. Our second point is... (See above)

Paul says here...read v. 7 – Who hindered you from obeying...? Paul is pointing directly at these men who have caused so much grief for the believers in the Galatian churches. Who hindered you – checked your growth or advancement? Who was it that pushed you back?

He says, this persuasion is not from him who calls you (v. 8). God was working in your lives, but this definitely did not come from him.

Verse 9 is an interesting verse – read it. I am reminded of the Jesus use of the term leaven when speaking of the kingdom of God. In Luke 13:21 he said regarding the kingdom, "It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." If you have ever baked bread you understand the idea – a small amount of leaven or yeast will grow and expand until it alters the state of the whole batch of dough.

That is the idea that Paul is getting at here. He used the same phrase in his first letter to the Corinthians. When he was addressing their tolerance of sin in their congregation (ch. 5) he made this same statement. His reference there was to sin and specific sinful conduct. Here he is speaking of those men who had come into the churches spreading their false doctrines of legalism.

Allowing these false teachers to remain in their assembly was like putting a small amount of leaven in a lump of dough. It won't be long until it affects the whole thing. If you do not deal with these men, whoever they are, they will corrupt the whole assembly.

Verses 10-12 are another short personal interjection by the Apostle. His concern and his love for these brethren are evident as he pleads with them to make the right choices. He also expresses confidence in them that they will choose the right way. Listen – read vv. 10-11, discuss

Read v. 12 – the NKJV says, "I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!" The word means to cut off, amputate. Some have seen it as a play on words with the term "circumcision" and

some translators have interpreted it that way, but that is not necessary in the text. He is really just wanting to see these agitators cut off, removed, their mouths stopped, so they cannot do any more harm.

### III. The Value of True Christian Liberty vv. 13-15

Now we come to the real core of the matter. If we are indeed free—free from bondage to sin, free from bondage to the law, then how does that manifest itself in our lives? How do we live in freedom?

Last week we talked about the real meaning of freedom. True freedom must express itself in ways that result in constructive and lasting value. If our acts of freedom lead to destruction then it is not real freedom. I think that is what Paul is telling us here in these verses.

Read vv. 13-15 – the NIV says, "...do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature..." A few weeks ago we sang that old hymn that says,

*Free from the law, O happy condition,  
Jesus has bled and there is remission,  
Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,  
Grace hath redeemed us once for all.*

Yes, we are free. But freedom was never intended to be self-serving. A self-centered, self-serving mind-set is not freedom. Paul makes it clear that we have been called to freedom. But selfishness is what we are set free from. The whole idea is that law-keeping is self-focussed. It is about me, what I am doing, what I can do to attain God's favor. But in Christ I am set free from that. I am now free to serve others.

True Christian liberty is not about being free to do anything I feel like doing without consequence; it is about being free to serve others with the love that Christ has shown me.

Look at v. 14 – Read it... But wait a minute. Didn't we say that we are no longer obligated to the law? Yes, we did. But there is a difference here that we cannot afford to miss.

In the latter part of ch. 4 Paul talked about those who are free in Christ having been born according to the Spirit. When we have been born of the Spirit, we are free to live the way God wants us to live. And

that involves loving others. In doing so we will be living in obedience to the law, as it represents the standard of God for our live. But the difference is that we will be doing it out of faith and love, with a desire to please our heavenly Father, and enables by the Spirit of God, rather than as an attempt to meet God's approval.

### Conclusion

I would like to wrap this up this morning by going back to v. 6. Paul makes an interesting statement there, which I think gives us a good summary of this whole passage – *read it.*

Paul was not opposed to circumcision in and of itself. The problem comes when it is required for salvation. Paul knew that the physical reality of being circumcised or not being circumcised is not the real issue. If you are in Christ, Paul says, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. It doesn't matter one way or the other.

What matters is "faith expressing itself through love." A life guided and empowered by the Spirit of God, backed up by the love of Christ lived out through our lives, is what true Christian liberty is really all about.

This could be a whole message in itself, but let me just remind you of the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 13 – the love chapter.

*"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 ESV)*

Do you hear what Paul is saying? If I have all knowledge and all kinds of abilities and I do all kinds of good deeds—if I give away everything I have to the poor, and even give up my own life, but I don't have love, I gain nothing. True Christian liberty is being free from the self-centered idea that I can satisfy God through my own efforts. It is freedom to serve other with the love of Jesus Christ.

Close by reading again from Galatians 5:6, 13-15.