

STAND FIRM IN CHRISTIAN FREEDOM!
PART 2

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:1

August 21, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

Christianity is freedom not bondage. This is the indispensable truth Paul is seeking to drive home to the Galatians (and us!). Having shown this from the Torah itself—that the Galatians are children of the free woman (4:21-31)—Paul now exhorts them to stand firm in this immeasurable blessing.

In 5:1 Paul sets forth two key aspects of Christian freedom. First, Paul states the fact of Christian freedom, “For freedom Christ has set us free...” (v. 1a). The purpose of Christ’s redemption was to obtain the believer’s freedom. Second, he sets forth the believer’s response to this freedom, “stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (v. 1b). The response of the believer is to stand firm in his or her freedom. These two key aspects embody the argument of the whole letter. Let’s now look at the fact of Christian freedom in 5:1a.

LESSON:

I. THE FACT OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST’S REDEMPTION WAS TO OBTAIN THE BELIEVER’S FREEDOM. V. 1A

Paul’s statement, “For freedom Christ has set us free...” raises some important questions. First, what is the “freedom” Paul is speaking of? What is a Christian freed from and to?

In the Greek, Paul places an article before “freedom” (Τῆ ἐλευθερίᾳ), which is restrictive (see Burton, *Galatians*, p. 270). So, the meaning would be something like, “For the freedom that I have been speaking of, Christ set us free.”

From the context, the freedom Paul is referring to is the believer’s freedom from the law’s curse. Specifically, Paul has in mind circumcision. According to the Judaizers the only saved Christian was a circumcised Christian. In Acts 15:1 we read, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Paul saw submitting to the Judaizer’s demand of circumcision as returning to a life of slavery because it obligates a man to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:3). Submitting to a “yoke of slavery” was in effect choosing to be a part of Ishmael instead of Isaac (4:21-31). It was choosing to place oneself under a “Do this and live” covenantal relationship with God in order to merit a favorable standing before God. However, because the keeping of God’s law is impossible all are therefore under the Law’s “curse” (Gal. 3:10; cf. Deut. 27:26).

Thus, the purpose of Christ's saving work is to free us from the curse/condemnation of the law (cf. 3:13; 4:5; Note: The dative "for freedom" (Τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ) functions as a dative of purpose, see Betz, *Galatians*, pp. 255-256). "Christ became a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13) to set us free (i.e., for the purpose of redeeming us from the curse of the law). It is by virtue of Christ's circumcision (i.e., His death on the cross, Col. 2:11; cf. Isa. 53:8) and not our own that we are freed from the law's curse and made a son of Abraham (i.e., belong to the people of God).

Understood in this way, we see that the believer's freedom is of paramount importance. Martin Luther reminds us, "the doctrine of Christian freedom must be carefully considered, both to support the doctrine of justification and to encourage and comfort our consciences..." (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 461). Your troubled conscience can find great relief and comfort, provided you turn your attention away from yourself and look only to Christ (see Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.2.).

Christian freedom first and foremost doesn't address issues on matters of indifference (*adiaphora*) but rather addresses issues of first importance—first! Commenting on Galatians 5:1, John Calvin writes,

...wise and skilful persons are aware that this is one of the most important doctrines connected with salvation. This is not a question whether you shall eat this or that food,- whether you shall observe or neglect a particular day, (which is the foolish notion entertained by many, and the slander uttered by some,) but what is your positive duty before God, what is necessary to salvation, and what cannot be omitted without sin. In short, the controversy relates to the liberty of conscience, when placed before the tribunal of God (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 146).

Paul has labored to show that it is by grace through faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the law that believers are justified—reckoned righteous (2:16). Calvin writes, "Removing, then, mention of law, and laying aside all consideration of works, we should, when justification is being discussed, embrace God's mercy alone, turn our attention from ourselves, and look only to Christ" (*Institutes*, 3.19.2.). All who receive and rest in Christ alone are free from the condemnation of the law, which otherwise hangs over them (Gal. 3:10).

This invaluable blessing is the appendage (appendix) of justification (cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.1.). All who receive justification are free to no longer live in doubt concerning God's favor or in fear of His judgment (cf. 1 Jn. 4:18). This is the immeasurable benefit of our freedom, which is based on justification by grace through faith in Christ alone.

The second aspect of this freedom—as Paul will show, e.g., 5:13-15—is that having been freed from the condemnation of the law, believers are now free to willingly obey the law by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We might say it like this: The law drives us to Christ (Gal. 3:24) and Christ frees us to obey the law by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:13-24). Thus, the purpose of Christian freedom is not to pursue licentiousness—the relaxation of all discipline (cf. *Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 20, "Galatians,"* p. 146). The purpose of Christian freedom is to encourage us and drive us—by the energy of the Spirit of Christ—to obey and do good works for our neighbor's benefit (cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.6).

However, no man will ever give willing, joyful obedience to God who only expects to receive a curse (cf., Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.5)! No one who lives under the perpetual dread of the law and slavish fear of God will ever be filled with willing, joyful, eagerness to obey and live for God (cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.4.). Walter Marshall, in his book, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, writes,

You cannot love God if you are under the continual, secret suspicion that He is really your enemy! You cannot love God if you secretly think He condemns and hates you. This kind of slavish fear will compel you to some hypocritical obedience—such as Pharaoh did when he let the Israelites go against his will. However, you will never truly love God if you are compelled only by fear. Your love for God must be won and drawn out by your understanding of God's love and goodness towards you—just as John testifies in 1 John 4:18-19: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear consists of torment; The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love Him, because He first loved us." You simply cannot love God unless you know and understand how much he loves you (p. 31).

You will never come to love God, obey Him and do good for your neighbor unless the guilt and curse of sin are removed from you. This is what happens when Christ justifies you—the guilt and curse of sin are removed and thus you are free (Gal. 3:13). But, as long as you see yourself still under the curse and condemnation of the law, your life will be characterized by despair, fear, depression, disobedience, lack of fervor, slavish duty, hypocritical obedience, etc... If you think you are still under the pronouncement of "Guilty!" or "Cursed!" you will never be able to live unto God in holiness. You must first be granted freedom from the curse of the law in order to willingly and delightfully obey the requirements of the Law.

Now, since the purpose of Christ's redemption was to bring about such a glorious freedom, this presupposes that at one time we were not free. The fact that we were once not free raises an important point. *The fact is we will never begin to grasp and appreciate this blood-bought gift of freedom until we begin to understand and feel the extent and depth of our sin and slavery.*

To understand the depth of our sin and slavery we have to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 1-2, when God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, He "stooped" to establish a relationship with them on the basis of a covenant. The terms of this covenantal relationship were set forth in a simple prohibition in Genesis 2:15-17, ¹⁵ "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." ¹⁶

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Within the bounds of this covenant, Adam and Eve were free to enjoy unhindered, unbroken fellowship with God and one another. However, should they break the covenant, death would immediately follow. In such an arrangement of law, there was no opposition between law and love/legal and relational. This was no cold relation or hardship. Obedience wasn't difficult. Adam and Eve were fully endowed by God with every faculty they needed to obey.

Yet, the serpent (satan) came and questioned God's goodness and cast doubt on His word (Gen. 3:1, 4-5). Adam and Eve gave in and in that very moment they lost their freedom and became slaves (3:6-7)! No longer covenant keepers, Adam and Eve were now covenant law-breakers. Because of man's Fall, the law inflicts a mortal wound upon all mankind. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul says that the law now kills. It has become a ministry of death (2 Cor. 3:7).

Moreover, the fall of Adam and Eve not only resulted in guilt but also moral corruption. Man's entire being (mind, will, emotions, body) is now totally bent toward evil. Theologians refer to this as original sin. Original sin does not refer to the first sin committed by Adam and Eve. Rather, it refers to the disastrous result of sin- the corruption of the entire human race- the fallen condition in which we are born (e.g., Ps. 51:5).

In addition, the consequences of Adam's sin went far beyond his—and Eve's—personal banishment from the presence of God (i.e., the garden). In Genesis 3, God confronts Adam not as a private person but as a public one (i.e., as the representative head of the whole human race, cf. Rom. 5:15-19). Adam's fall brought about disastrous consequences for all his descendants (except Jesus!).

As a result of the Fall, you and I are no longer free. Rather, we are completely and totally enslaved to sin. We are unable and unwilling to give joyful obedience to God's law. The result then is a sentence of guilty (curse). You—like Adam and Eve—were created to live in an intimate relationship with your Creator and one another. But, disastrously, not only Adam, but also you and I have turned our backs on our covenant Lord in a self-willed act of idolatrous rebellion.

As Michael Horton has pointed out, “The point of idolatry is to maintain our own autonomy (i.e., sovereignty) over God” (*God of Promise*, p. 15). D.A. Carson calls it “the de-god-ing of God.” Concerning Adam's transgression of God's command, he writes, “What is crucial is not the tree but the rebellion. What is so wretchedly tragic is God's image bearer standing over against God. This is the de-god-ing of God so that I can be my own god. This, in short, is idolatry” (*The God Who Is There*, p. 33).

Consequently, man's relationship to God is now marked by separation, fear, and dread (Gen. 3:7-8). Immediately after breaking the covenant, Genesis 3:7-8 reads,

⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked (i.e., exposed before the Lawgiver). And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. ⁸ And they heard the sound (voice, שָׁמְעוּ) of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Knowing that the Creator had become their Judge and that they had come under the penalty of the creation covenant (Gen. 2:15-17), Adam and Eve, in an act of self-justification, attempt to cover up their nakedness (Gen. 3:7).

Fear instead of freedom marks their relation to God.

When they hear the sound (voice, שָׁמְעוּ) of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, they immediately hide themselves from His presence (Gen. 3:8). While hiding, God calls out in judgment to Adam, "Where are you" (v. 9, i.e., Where are you in relation to me now that you have transgressed/broken My covenant?)? Adam replies, "I heard the sound (voice, שָׁמְעוּ) of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself" (v. 10).

Tragically, Adam's fearful response will become- and is- the reply of every human conscience in the presence of God. For example, in Hebrews 12:21, the author says that so terrifying was the sight of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, Moses said, "I tremble with fear." No longer free to enjoy an intimate relationship with his creator, man is now condemned by His creator. God's voice in law terrifies the consciences of law-breakers.

One of the most significant consequences of the fall is what it has done to our ability to obey God. Before the fall, man had the ability to sin and the ability not to sin. However, after the fall, all men are slaves to their fallen condition and unable to refrain from sinning. We are what Augustine said, "not able not to sin." In other words, we are no longer free to not sin. We sin out of necessity due to the corruption of our nature.

Martin Luther called this the "bondage of the will." Original sin leaves us in an enslaved, condemned state of being unable to refrain from sinning. Yes, we still are able to choose what we desire. But this is precisely our problem! We don't desire God! We don't desire to obey His Law! Instead of desiring to love God and our neighbor, we desire to love ourselves and live for ourselves! We desire to maintain our own autonomy (i.e., sovereignty) over God. We desire to "de-god God" and be our own god. The last two famous lines in William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus" captures this when he writes, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."

Our desires are enslaved by our fallen nature. In our fallen state, we are free only to sin. Thus, we possess a freedom without freedom, which is a real moral bondage. This means our lives are characterized by disobedience rather than obedience to God's law.

This then is our predicament: God is our Creator and Lawgiver. As His creatures we are accountable to Him. After the Fall He did not rescind His Law. He still demands that we obey. But, because we are now fallen, we no longer have the moral ability to obey (nor do we even desire to obey!). In Romans 8:7-8, Paul writes, “⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Thus, we are slaves. We are in bondage to God’s law which demands, “Do this and live.” But, our problem is that we can’t “Just do it!” Therefore, we don’t receive life but rather a curse.

Part of our problem though is that we just don’t see ourselves as really in that bad of a state. To be sure, we are quick to point out the evil of Hitlers, Stalins, Pol Pots, Osama Bin Ladens and Sadaam Husseins of the world. We love to expose the hedonistic and narcissistic lifestyles of the Hollywood elites and the moral corruption of MTV (or simply other members of the church!). But, we don’t tend to see ourselves as slaves, condemned by God’s law. Jerry Bridges writes,

Every day we sin, both consciously and unconsciously, both willfully and unintentionally. We evangelical believers generally abstain from the grosser sins of society; in fact, we tend to sit in judgment of those who practice such things. But beneath the surface of our own lives we tolerate all kinds of ‘refined’ sins such as selfishness, covetousness, pride, resentment, envy, jealousy, self-righteousness, and a critical spirit toward others” (*The Gospel For Real Life*, pp. 25-26).

Have you ever truly thought about the demand of the Great Commandment? In Matthew 22:35, Matthew reports how a lawyer- an expert in the law/Pharisee- asks Jesus a question in order to test Him. The lawyer asks, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law” (v. 36)?

Jesus replies by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, “³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Like the lawyer, we often seemed justified in our own eyes because we fail to truly understand how broad and exacting God’s law is. What does the requirement to love God and our neighbor really look like? What does it like to live under a “Do this and live” arrangement with God? Here are a few examples of what it looks like to love God:

- Your love for God appears as hatred for anyone or anything else (Ex. 20:3; Lk. 14:26)
- Your only desire on earth is for God alone (Ps. 73:25)

- You always do the things that are pleasing to God (Jn. 8:29)
- Your only will is to do God's will (Lk. 22:42)
- The accomplishment of God's will/work is more important to you than satisfying your desire for food (Jn. 4:34)
- You only do whatever the Father does (Jn. 5:19)
- Your desire for God's glory governs and motivates everything you do—your eating and drinking, your work ethic in your vocation, your obedience to your employer, your shopping and spending of money, your service in the church and home, your Internet surfing, your telephone conversations, etc... (1 Corinthians 10:31).
- You respond with joy to God in every hardship, frustration, difficulty and trial you encounter (James 1:2).
- You never become discouraged or frustrated by adverse circumstances because you are totally confident God is always working all things together for your good (Romans 8:28).
- You recognize His loving and caring providence in every event of your life and patiently receive both success and failure from His hand (1 Samuel 2:7; Psalm 75:6-7; Matt. 10:29-31)
- You are always content because you know He will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5)
- The first petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be your Name," is the most important prayer you pray (Matthew 6:9; see Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life*, p. 27).

What about loving your neighbor? What does obedience to this command look like?

- You always consider others more significant than yourself (Philip. 2:3)
- You naturally always look out for the interests of others and not your own (Philip. 2:4)
- You never become bitter or hold grudges toward anyone (Heb. 12:15)
- You are always patient and kind; you are never jealous; you never seek to boost yourself up before others; you are never arrogant (1 Cor. 13:4)

- You are never rude but always gracious and considerate. You never insist on your own way, you are not selfish; you are never irritable, easily irritated or angered.

You are never resentful (i.e., you never keep record of wrongs; you don't become a bookkeeper and keep track of every wrong that is done to you and rehearse them for later reference!)

Instead, you are always like God who never cultivates memories of the evils we have done against Him. We never hold on to wrongs done against us and then hold them against others.

We easily forgive the wrongs done against us (1 Cor. 13:5; Matt. 18:21-35; Eph. 4:32)

Do this and you will live! But, the reality is that even if you did these things, you would not live because you still would not have fulfilled the entire law. This is just a partial list of what it means to love God and your neighbor (i.e., to fulfill the Law)! You can't pull off this partial list—let alone the whole law—for a split second! Thus you are enslaved to the demands of the law, which commands, “Do this and live.”

It was for this very reason (our condemnation and slavery) that Christ came to set us free (5:1a)! Christ was born under the law in order to keep it for us (Gal. 4:4). Unlike Adam—and us—He is the perfect man who fulfilled the requirements of the law. Further, He purchased our freedom from such bondage and condemnation for us on the cross (cf. 3:13; 4:5). John Calvin writes,

It is because ‘Christ was made a curse, that He might redeem us from the curse of the law, (Gal. iii. 13;) because He has revoked the power of the law, so far as it held us liable to the judgment of God under the penalty of eternal death; because, in a word, He has rescued us from the tyranny of sin, satan, and death’ (*Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21, p. 147*).

The blessing and possession of this freedom is given to us through the gospel! Through faith alone, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits—freedom being one. A justified man is no longer a debtor to the law (Gal. 5:3). That is to say, the Christian is free from being bound to yield perfect and perpetual obedience as the condition of life and to give an infinite satisfaction for his own sins. The believer is free from the crushing demands of the law, which gives birth to slavery, terrifies, accuses, and leads to despair.

The justified believer cannot be condemned for his or her sin (cf. Rom. 8:1)! True freedom then can only come from outside of us. It must come from the work of the triune God on the soul. God the Father sent the Son into the world in order to redeem us from our slavery in order to adopt us as free sons (Gal. 4:4-5). And, He sent the Spirit into our hearts to assure us of our sonship and freedom (Gal. 4:6-7). Thus, we are not only partly dependent upon grace for our freedom but rather totally dependent upon grace.

Here then is how we are to think about our relation to God and His law. Prior to our conversion, our relationship to the law was one of *Guilt*. The law says you “ought” to obey but you can’t. Therefore, you are guilty/cursed. This leads us to *Grace*. Through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled your “ought.” He fulfilled the law requirements and bore its penalties. Thus, He removed your “can’t” and your guilt. Now, we respond to the demands of God’s law with *Gratitude*. The law now says you “ought” because you can. The law says to the justified believer, “Be who you are!” True freedom then is not the freedom to do whatever you please but the freedom to do what you “ought” according to God’s Law.

REFLECTION:

Are you beginning now to see how glorious this freedom is? Are you beginning to sense what an enormous privilege you have? Well then does Paul exhorts us, “stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1b).

Why would you choose a life that is conditioned upon perfect obedience for justification? Such a choice is not freeing but enslaving. It is not only foolish but also fatal (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 307)! So, look out of yourself and look to Christ alone, who has redeemed you from the curse of the law. He will not turn you away because it was for this very purpose that He came. “For freedom Christ has set us free!”

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