

STAND FIRM IN CHRISTIAN FREEDOM
PART 1

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:1

August 14, 2001

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

Christianity is freedom not bondage. Galatians has often been labeled, “The Magna Carta of Christian freedom” and Galatians 5:1 is one of the key reasons why. We may even title our study in this letter as, “Galatians: The Gospel of Christian Freedom.”

A. THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Paul’s call to Christian freedom actually began in 4:12-31 (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 282). Paul based his call to freedom on an argument from friendship (4:12-20) and on an analogy from the Torah (4:21-31). In addition, Paul had already hinted at this notion of freedom in 2:4-5, when he stated that the purpose of his ministry was to guard the believer’s freedom by preserving the truth of the gospel. Having introduced the concept of freedom, he now places it emphatically in the center of his section (4:12-6:10) that deals with the believer’s freedom (see Betz, *Galatians*, p. 255).

First, because the Galatians are sons of Abraham (3:7) and no longer under the Mosaic Covenant, Paul calls on them to live in freedom from it just as he—who is Jewish—does (“become as I am” 4:12).

Even Paul—a Jew—was no longer subject to the Mosaic Covenant (4:12). In his pre-Christian life as a strict Pharisee, Paul’s entire life was structured and driven by a multitude of laws, restrictions and ceremonies (Gal. 1:13-14). His whole life consisted of striving to keep endless lists of rules (cf. Philip. 3:6).

The Jews found 613 commandments in the Law from Genesis to Deuteronomy. Trying to remember 613 laws let alone keep them was an utterly impossible task. It is no wonder that Paul viewed the Galatians as subjecting themselves to slavery. Having been delivered from such a burdensome, enslaving way of life, Paul was zealous (4:18) to proclaim and preserve the freedom he had come to know in the life of his converts.

Second, Paul calls the Galatians to live in freedom from the Law because this is precisely what the Law itself teaches (4:21-31, “do you not listen to the law?”). Taking up the analogy of Sarah and Hagar from Genesis, Paul asks the Galatians, “Do you really desire to live under the Law? Do you really know what the Law says? The Law itself tells you not to live under it!”

Now, in 5:1, Paul concludes the argument of his analogy in 4:21-31 as well as sets forth the basis of his exhortations that follow in 5:1-6:10. (Note: There are various opinions as to the placement of 5:1. It seems best to view it as serving as a “bridge verse” or

“transition paragraph” between 4:21-31 and 5:1ff. see Fung, p. 216; Schreiner, pp. 307, 310; Burton, p. 270)

Since the Galatians were not children of Hagar—the slave woman—but sons of Sarah—the free woman (v. 31) they are to stand firm in this freedom by the power of the Holy Spirit and not return to living under the slavery of law, whether it is the Mosaic Covenant or any kind of legal system.

As we come to 5:1ff., it will be helpful to set 5:1 in the overall contextual flow of Paul’s letter so we can see where we have been and where we are going. In 4:12-6:10 Paul will set forth:

- I. THE CALL TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM, 4:12-31
 - II. THE INDICATIVE AND IMPERATIVE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM, 5:1
 - III. THE THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM, 5:2-24
 - IV. THE DUTIES OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM, 5:25-6:10
- B. THE BATTLE FOR CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Clearly we see from Galatians that we possess a glorious freedom. But, like the Galatians, how often do we forget in the daily battle that the Christian life is one of freedom (sonship) and not bondage (slavery)?

Though we confess the gospel in theory, in practice we often deny it by defaulting to a list of rules and restrictions. We tend to evaluate our standing/favor with God based on what we do rather than on what Christ has done for us. Jerry Bridges in his book, *The Discipline of Grace*, writes,

“A significant part of the Mosaic Law was the promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (see Deuteronomy 28, especially verses 1-2 and 15). Some Christians live as if that principle applies to them today. But Paul said that ‘the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith’ (Galatians 3:24). Christ has already borne the curses for our disobedience and earned for us the blessings of obedience. As a result we are now to look to Christ alone—not Christ plus our performance—for God’s blessings in our lives. We are saved by grace and we are to live by grace alone. When we pray to God for His blessing, He does not examine our performance to see if we are worthy. Rather, He looks to see if we are trusting in the merit of His Son as our only hope for securing His blessing” (pp. 18-19).

Like the Galatians, we are in constant danger of forgetting to live by grace through faith in Christ alone and go right back under a form of law. In fact, we can become fixated on our performance and totally forget Christ’s performance!

But, Paul is showing us that legal bondage and gospel freedom cannot coexist. The law promises life on the condition of perfect obedience (Gal. 3:10, 12; 5:3). The gospel promises life in Christ alone, through faith alone (3:9, 14, 21-22).

A Christian is not one who constantly strives to earn or keep God's favor or become more holy on the basis of what he or she does. Martin Luther, in his work, *Christian Liberty*, writes, "...the Christian who is consecrated by his faith does good works, but the works do not make him holier or more Christian, for that is the work of faith alone. And if a man were not first a believer and a Christian, all his works would amount to nothing and would be truly wicked and damnable sins" (pp. 23-24).

Righteousness is not bestowed on the basis of trying to keep an endless list of enslaving rules. Paul has been laboring in this letter to show that the Christian life does not consist of a "Do this and live" covenantal arrangement with God (3:21). Rather, the Christian life consists of a "Live, now do this" covenantal arrangement with God (promise; 3:18- we live by promise not performance). The former is bondage; the latter is freedom.

Paul has labored to show us that the Christian life consists of sonship not slavery (4:7). Christians are the recipients of a rich inheritance and the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of adoption not bondage (3:2, 5, 14; 4:1-7). Christ, was sent by the Father into the world to win our freedom (4:4-5) and the Spirit of His Son was sent into our hearts to assure us of this freedom—to testify that we God's sons rather than slaves (Gal. 4:6-7).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the sign and pledge of our adoption and freedom as sons. He is given to us to assure us that God is our Father and no longer our Judge. He assures us that God is for us not against us. He assures us that we are free from the curse of the law and eternally accepted as beloved sons.

Now, in Galatians 5:1-6:10, Paul reveals that it is this gift of the Spirit rather than the external Law of Moses that empowers the Christian life/obedience (see especially 5:16-24 where Paul shows how the believer's freedom consists of life in the Spirit rather than life under the law).

C. THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

For Paul, Christian freedom was not a secondary/peripheral issue but rather resided at the heart of the Christian faith and life. Freedom is the central theological concept that sums up the Christian's state before God and in this world. Moreover, it is the basic concept underlying Paul's argument throughout Galatians (Betz, *Galatians*, p. 255). Preserving and living in the freedom of the gospel is vital to the wellbeing of the church. In the *Institutes*, John Calvin discusses the doctrine of Christian freedom immediately after his treatment of justification (3.9.1.). He begins by commenting on its importance. He writes,

He who proposes to summarize gospel teaching ought by no means to omit an explanation of this topic. For it is a thing of prime necessity, and apart from a knowledge of it consciences dare undertake almost nothing without doubting;

they hesitate and recoil from many things; they constantly waver and are afraid. But freedom is especially an appendage of justification and is of no little avail in understanding its power... unless this freedom be comprehended, neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known (3.19.1).

All who trust in Christ belong to the Jerusalem above and to the free woman (4:21-31). The Galatians, however, were on the verge of abandoning their freedom in Christ for a life of slavery under the law. Having been rescued from the slavery of pagan religion, they are now on the verge of succumbing to the slavery of Judaism (cf. 4:8-9; see Lightfoot, *Galatians*, p. 185).

Specifically, the Galatians were being tempted to accept circumcision (5:2), which meant taking upon themselves the obligation to keep the whole law (5:3). It seems that the Galatians didn't realize that submitting to circumcision meant that they were obligating themselves to keep the whole law (5:3). The Judaizers had cast a spell over the Galatians (3:1). The Galatians were deceived into believing that conforming their lives to the Mosaic Law—getting circumcised—was an advancement to what Paul had initially taught them concerning the Christian faith and life.

But for Paul such an “advancement” constituted a spiritual disaster. He saw it as turning their backs on freedom and giving themselves over to bondage. Giving into the demand to be circumcised was bondage because it obligated the Galatians to keep the whole law in order to be justified (5:3).

When it comes to fulfilling God's law, one is not free to pick and choose which requirements to obey. Submitting to one requirement obligates a man to keep the whole law perfectly for his justification (5:3), which no man can do (cf. 3:10–11, 21). Living under the obligation to keep the whole law rather than receiving and resting in Christ alone—who has fulfilled all of the legal obligations for us (cf. 3:10, 13)—is bondage (see Leon Morris, *Galatians*, p. 151).

Choosing circumcision meant slavery—a life driven by a “Do this and live” covenantal arrangement with God. It meant subjecting oneself to live under the condition of perfect obedience for life. Such a legal arrangement was to abandon what was of central importance for an understanding of Christianity and for living the Christian life. And so we see from Galatians how Paul emphasized the importance of Christian freedom.

The Apostle Paul knew—based on his previous life in Judaism (Gal. 1:13-14)—that there was no place for trying to earn God's favor through one's own efforts. Having been awakened to the gospel of Christian freedom, Paul understood that the Christian life did not consist of a “Do this and live” covenantal relationship with God (i.e., continual effort to acquire merit before God). Instead, becoming a Christian meant entering into a life of freedom (i.e., a life driven by the good news of a “Live, now do this” covenantal arrangement with God).

Freedom is the immeasurable privilege—fruit—of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. The themes of slavery and freedom (4:21-31) correspond to and illustrate the contrast between righteousness by law and righteousness by faith; legal bondage and gospel blessing.

Underlying then Paul's whole discussion of the analogy of Hagar and Sarah is the truth of justification by grace through faith alone over against justification by works of the law. Paul has shown how the Galatians (Gentiles-us!) are the sons of Abraham (3:7) and belong to God's people on the basis of faith in God's promise rather than by works of the law.

He has thoroughly demonstrated the incompatibility of salvation by works of the law and faith in Christ (cf. 2:16; 3-4:11). He has shown how the Mosaic law is no longer in force (3:24-25; 4:2-4). Therefore, having fixed the themes of "slavery" and "freedom" explicitly in the minds of the Galatians (4:21-31), Paul now directs his readers to stand firm in this freedom that they have been given. This fundamental distinction leads us to a fourth important observation about 5:1.

D. THE INDICATIVE AND IMPERATIVE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

In 5:1, Paul sets forth the indicative and imperative of Christian freedom. This indicative/imperative relationship in 5:1 embodies the argument of the whole letter (Burton, *Galatians*, p. 270).

The indicative is: "For freedom Christ has set us free." This is the fact (good news). The imperative is: "stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." This is the response (ethics).

Christ has come for the purpose of setting us free (v. 1a; He came to liberate slaves and make them sons). Therefore, the response (v. 1b) is to keep on standing firm in this freedom and not subject ourselves to the legalistic bondage of a "do this and live" covenantal relationship with God.

The importance of this indicative/imperative relationship set forth by Paul must never be assumed or underemphasized. Theodore Beza warned that "ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity" (*The Christian Faith*, p. 41).

The exhortations in 4:12-6:10 are grounded on the gospel truth that the Holy Spirit dwells in those who receive and rest in Christ alone for justification. Thus, it is crucial to understand that Paul's basis and motive for Christian living is not law but gospel.

But many times in one's zeal to "bring people into line"—so to speak—the gospel is not expounded as the basis and motive for sanctified behavior. But, in all of his letters, Paul clearly draws the connection between the gospel indicatives and imperatives of sanctification.

Few understand that the indicative/imperative relationship is the doctrine of the church. In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus opens with this first question and answer. He asks, “What is the doctrine of the church?” The answer is, “The doctrine of the church is the entire and uncorrupted doctrine of the law and gospel...” (p. 1).

He goes on to state that that this relationship is the chief and most expressive mark of the true church (Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 1). This distinction comprehends the sum and substance of the Scriptures—law and gospel (Ursinus, p. 2).

Moreover, it is one of the chief distinctions between Christianity and all other religions and philosophies (Ibid, p. 3). It is only in the true church that the Law of God is retained entire and uncorrupted. For example, all other religions operate on the principle of “Do this and live” or “I obey therefore I am accepted.” But, Christianity operates on the principle, “Live, now do” or “I am accepted therefore I obey.”

Clearly, we see in Galatians how the Judaizers had corrupted and misused the law as a means of justification. But, it is clear from Paul in Galatians that the Law was never given to justify (2:16, or sanctify, Gal. 3:3). Theodore Beza writes,

“The fact is, the Law was never given to justify us (for if this were so, Jesus Christ would have died in vain, as St. Paul says; Gal 2:21; 3:18-21), but, on the contrary, to condemn us, and to show the hell which is opened wide to swallow us, to annihilate and totally abase our pride, in making the multitude of our sins pass before our eyes and showing us the wrath of God which is revealed from Heaven against us (Rom 1:18; 4:15; Gal 3:10, 12)” (p. 44).

Thus, it is only in the true church that the truth of the gospel is preserved (2:5, 14) and proclaimed (Gal. 1:8-9, 16).

Second, as we just noted, the indicative/imperative relationship is the foundation of the Christian life/ethics. It is this relationship that shapes and structures Paul’s ethical instructions in chapters 4-6. The imperative (response)—“stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery”—is based on and flows from the indicative (fact)—“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

Whenever this relationship of indicative/imperative is assumed, forgotten, neglected or not made self-consciously explicit, the result is that both the Christian message and life falls into legalism or license. Both errors are serious threats to Christian freedom.

Paul has clearly refuted legalism by showing that the law was never given to justify (2:16; 3:21). And in 5:1-6:10 he will show that the good news of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone doesn’t downplay the law—love, obedience or holiness—but rather upholds the law.

Precisely because the Christian is justified through faith alone, he or she is now free for the first time to do his or her duty with joy and gratitude rather than slavish duty, worry, insecurity and doubts. The justified believer no longer has to be paralyzed with doubts and fears over his standing with God.

A justified believer doesn't have to worry about how he will satisfy God. The justified believer no longer has to doubt whether God accepts his works even though they are imperfect and stained with sin. In justification, not only we but our works also are justified. The justification of our works as believers is seldom emphasized—let alone thought of.

But, through faith in Christ alone, God not only accepts me as righteous and looks upon me with favor, but He also accepts and approves of my works. John Calvin, discussing how God approves our works, writes,

“Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well as are justified” (*Institutes*, 3.17.10).

Not only our past sins but also our present sins—including our imperfect works/obedience—are covered by Christ's sinlessness! Whatever fault or impurity is in them is buried in Christ's purity! Even though our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin (HC, Q. 62), God graciously accepts them on account of Christ alone and doesn't charge their faults to our account!

What comfort! What confidence! What freedom! Since this is true, Jerry Bridges writes, “We don't have to feel guilt-ridden and insecure in our relationship with God. We don't have to wonder if He likes us. We can begin each day with the deeply encouraging realization that I am accepted by God, not on the basis of my personal performance, but on the basis of the infinitely perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ” (*The Gospel For Real Life*, pp. 16-17).

Through faith by the Spirit, we come into union with Christ. Therefore, the Christian can take comfort in whatever Christ has as though it were his own (cf. Luther, *Christian Liberty*, p. 14). Knowing this truth frees and motivates you to love God and serve your neighbor without doubting whether you or your service is pleasing to God.

Having been freed from the condemnation of the law, you are now free for the first time in your life to obey. This is the power and inestimable privilege of the believer's freedom! Thus, we see from Paul how justification by grace through faith alone serves as the basis and motive of Christian duty (see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, pp. 3-24).

It is by virtue of God's justifying "YES!" that the Christian is given, through faith, a good conscience about his works (Althaus, p. 6). Thus, even though our "best works" are imperfect and defiled with sin, they are acceptable because they are grounded in the assurance of God's prior "YES!" of justification.

Precisely because we have God's approval, we can move forward and act in confidence and joy. The fact that Christ has set you free is the basis and motive for all your response as a Christian. You cannot truly obey God's commands unless you are firm and unshaken in the confidence of His divine favor.

Through faith, the more you recognize the great spiritual privileges that are given to you, the more your heart will be filled with love by the Holy Spirit. And in turn, you will experience and enjoy the freedom you have been given and you will be made into a loving, joyful worker for your neighbor's good.

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