

Called to Freedom

Liberty: Experiencing Freedom

“Freedom” is a word much heard and much spoken these past few days as we Americans celebrated the Fourth of July – Independence Day. “Freedom” is a word on the lips of men and women throughout the world as they long to experience and exercise liberty.

Let’s take this concept of “freedom” into a different realm – a different arena this morning as we begin a message series titled: *Called to Freedom*.

As Christians, we often talk as if we are free, but live as though enslaved. What does it mean to really live free in Christ? In the end – it’s your choice.

The biblical text for our series this month is in the New Testament letter of Paul to the Galatians, chapter five. Let me give you an overview on where we are going these next four weeks:

Today: Called to Freedom – *Liberty: Experiencing Freedom*
Next week: Called to Freedom – *Legalism: Stifling Freedom*
July 20: Called to Freedom – *License: Flaunting Freedom*
July 27: Called to Freedom – *Lordship: Choosing Freedom*

Now, turn in your Bible to Galatians, chapter five.

Galatians 5:1

It was for freedom that Christ freed us. Paul chooses to use two different Greek words in that statement regarding freedom. The difference is subtle but worth noting.

When Paul says that “Christ set us free,” it means “to be free from bondage or slavery.” The word “freedom” can also be translated “liberty.” The first speaks of the action of freeing or releasing; the second – a position or state of mind. *Liberty* describes the state of mind or being that is experienced because of being set free.

This raises the question: “From what have we been set free?” That’s the focus of our attention this morning. Let’s consider the question first from a broad perspective and then narrow to the focus of Galatians five.

Turn back to chapter one. After a few words of greeting, Paul launches into the reason for his writing this letter:

Galatians 1:6-7

Paul, on his first missionary journey which took place around A.D. 47/48, ventured into the region of Galatia, modern-day Turkey. He visited cities such as Iconium, Derbe and Lystra. His strategy at the beginning of this missionary enterprise was to go to the synagogue and preach of the Risen Christ to the Jews – those who had the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures. These were the ones you would have expected to be the most desirous, the most prepared, to hear the message: “The Messiah has come.”

But Paul’s preaching, for the most part, fell on deaf ears and Paul faced the anger, wrath and rejection of God’s people, the Jews. Turn over to the book of Acts, chapter 13.

Acts 13:44-52

We see the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham more than two thousand years before – a promise that the whole world would be blessed through him and his descendants. Paul now turns the focus of his ministry to proclaiming the Gospel to the Gentiles.

People responded to Paul’s preaching of the Gospel and fledgling churches were established throughout the Galatian region. Sometime around A.D. 49/50, word came to Paul, informing him of problems facing those churches. Jewish Christians, called Judaizers, were telling these new followers of Jesus that, in order to be really saved, they needed to undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision; they needed to observe the Jewish feasts and holy days; they needed to follow the Old Testament Law. All this was necessary to experience salvation.

Paul sits down, probably in the city of Corinth, and writes to these young believers – his spiritual children because of his preaching Christ. He appeals to them, calling them back to a proper understanding of the freedom into which they were called.

Paul reminds them of the Gospel they had received and believed when he was with them. He declares that this Gospel was a message of grace found in Jesus Christ. Look again at what he says in chapter one, verse six – **Galatians 1:6**.

He says this is the heart of the truth that captured him on the road to Damascus – **Galatians 1:15-16**.

God set Paul free. The Gospel brings freedom – liberty! But freedom from what?

First of all, the Bible explains that we are all enslaved, in bondage, to sin. This slavery is rooted in the fact that we are in the line of Adam, whose disobedience introduced sin and sin's consequence – death – into the human experience. It is also rooted in our own sinful choices – choosing what we want to do, choosing to live how we want to live – apart from God and his desires for us.

Turn back a few books towards the beginning of your New Testament to the Gospel of John, chapter eight.

John 8:31-34

The Apostle Paul uses the language of slavery and freedom often in his writings. He lived in a world that daily dealt with circumstances illustrating these concepts. It is estimated that up to one-half of the population in the Roman Empire were slaves. Some were the result of foreign military conquests; others were sold into slavery, being unable to pay their debts; many were born of slave parents; still others willfully chose to be slaves, having patrons who took care of them financially, including many professionals such as doctors and lawyers.

A common sight was a person standing atop the public auction block, being sold to the highest bidder. In that context, the apostle describes men and women being

enslaved to sin and under the judgment of sin with the sentence of death – spiritual separation from God.

Paul writes in Romans, chapter six, that every person is enslaved. The question is “to what or to whom?” He writes a few chapters earlier:

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. – *Romans 3:22b-23*

This is why Jesus came; this is the message of the Gospel – that Christ came to free sinners. That only by the grace of God through the death of his Son can sinners be set free. Paul goes on in Romans three to say, speaking of those who are set free:

...and are justified (i.e. declared righteous, in the right) by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation (i.e. satisfaction) by his blood, to be received by faith.

This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

– *Romans 3:24-26*

By God addressing the sin problem, he remains just – and yet can justify those who believe. Here’s a story I’ve used before but it so clearly illustrates this truth.

Let’s suppose you are driving down I-95 going in excess of 100 miles per hour. You get pulled over by the Virginia state police and cited for reckless driving, defined as going over 20 miles per hour above the posted speed limit.

The Commonwealth of Virginia takes reckless driving very seriously as a criminal charge and they have the ability to hand out pretty steep penalties even with a first time conviction. The maximum sentence for a first reckless driving conviction is a year in jail and/or up to \$2,500 in fines.

You go before the judge who hears the case against you and he declares you “guilty” and chooses to fine you the maximum of \$2,500 or a year in jail. Well, you’re flat broke. The deputies begin to haul you off to serve your sentence.

But, let's add a variable. Let's say that the judge just happens to be your father who loves you dearly. Now, he can't say, "Well, that's okay. I know you didn't mean any harm. So, I'm going to let you off the hook. You can go free."

He cannot do that and still be a "just" judge. He must still find you guilty and sentence you under the law. He pounds the gavel and closes the case.

But then he gets up from his seat, takes off his judicial robe, and comes down from the bench. And he says, "I'll pay the penalty for you." And you go free. That's the picture Paul paints in Romans, chapter three. God is both just and the justifier because he comes down off the bench of heaven and, in his Son pays the penalty for you. And you go free.

That's what God in Christ has done for you. Sin has been judged, not overlooked. The penalty has been paid. You are set free from the demands, from the consequences, of sin. God has set you free.

God set you free that you might live in a state of liberty, that you might experience freedom. If you are counting on anything else or anything in addition to the grace of God through believing to save you, you are not living free.

Sin, and its habits of thinking and reasoning, are so ingrained in us that we struggle to really know, really understand, really experience the freedom Christ has secured for us. We have this insatiable desire or need to do something, to justify ourselves before God. Maybe it is through church attendance, more often through good works – trying to be a good person.

The Gospel declares: there is nothing you can do. There is nothing more to be done. Christ has done it all!

To still try to add anything to the grace of God, to the work accomplished in the cross of Christ, is to deny the efficacy, the sufficiency, of God's work in Christ. It is to declare that there is yet something more that must be done in order for God to pardon you, to set you free from sin and death.

To the Galatians, Paul writes in chapter two, verse 21: “... if righteousness were through the law (that is, as opposed to the grace of God), then Christ died for no purpose.”

The Law, and we will deal with this more next week, demands righteousness. But the Law cannot produce righteousness. Paul writes this in his letter to the Romans, chapter eight:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

– *Romans 8:1-4*

Now, look again at Galatians 5:1 – “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore....”

“For freedom Christ has set us free” is simply a statement of fact. Then, Paul adds an imperative, a command: “Therefore stand firm.” The verb is in the present tense, giving it the meaning: “keep standing firm.”

There is an on-going action that is required on our part related to freedom. It is reckoning of the fact that Christ has set you free. It is a daily responsibility to stand in freedom.

So what can you do on a daily basis to stand firm in your freedom?

1) Thank God each day that Jesus’ death was sufficient to pay for your sins – that there is nothing to be added to his work to deliver you from sin and death.

2) Confess daily that your salvation is only by the grace of God. There is nothing you can do or need to do other than believing the Gospel and trusting in Jesus for salvation.

3) Acknowledge every day that it is for freedom that Christ set you free. Stop trying to add anything more to what Christ has already done.

4) Live each day in liberty, experiencing freedom. Paul writes in Romans six, exhorting us to “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11).

5) Believe the truth of what God has said about you and then live it out each day, joyfully choosing to be obedient to the One who has set you free.

Know it; believe it; live it. Paul puts it this way in Galatians, chapter two:

I have crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. – *Galatians 2:20*

Know it; believe it; live it.

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore.” Now, Paul goes on to add another thing. This is what leads us into our subject next week. He says: “Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Paul is speaking to Christians – to those who have been set free by Christ to experience liberty. But he says it is possible for believers to submit again to a yoke of slavery. Paul is warning them – and us – about the dangers of legalism. This deadly disease is alive and well in the Christian church today. We’ll address this problem next week.