

Set Free to Be Free

Part 8—That Which Separates

Galatians 5:1-15

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1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

2 Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. 3 Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. 4 You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

7 You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? 8 Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 9 A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. 10 I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. 11 But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. 12 I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.. (Galatians 5:1-15, NRSV)

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So often when I return from vacation, I feel like in order to recover, I need a vacation. This summer was no exception. I came away from some vacation time right into summer camp at Westminster Woods. In the course of those camp days there were twisted joints, pulled muscles, anxiety, nausea, tears, hard questions, shortness of breath, a little bit of poison oak. And that was just me. There were many students, staff, and

counselors working through real life in the midst of that time together. But what I noticed more than any of the medical or emotional concerns was a maturity and confidence of faith that really surprised me in some wonderful ways. I hope you catch glimpses of it during this next year.

Summer camp can be an environment where young people understand the gospel in full color. Often times the school year is full of opportunities to achieve or to fail, to fill requirements or miss out, to pull ahead or fall behind, to measure worth or to feel a growing sense of unworthiness. This makes it really difficult for all of us to communicate, or at least to hear, a different message...one of receiving instead of achieving, being filled rather than filling, drawing near rather than getting ahead, to be measured by what Christ has done instead of what we have left undone.

The Galatians faced a similar battle. Paul was preaching this message of grace, a gospel of righteousness based on the currency of Christ's blood alone. But he wasn't speaking into a vacuum in which he would only have to say it once. Paul was competing against contrary voices, some very subtle and some very loud, that claimed there was more than the blood of Christ involved in our salvation and in the living out of our Christian lives. They were the voices of the if's, and's, and but's.

Are you familiar with those terms? Perhaps when you were younger you heard an adult in your life ask you do something, like clean your room for the 10th time. They would say, “Today, you *will* clean your room, no if's, and's, or but's about it.”

But these deadly words were threatening to destroy the fragile faith of the Galatians. The group of people were the Judaizers, the faithful group of God's people that probably in their heart of hearts wanted to welcome these new believers into their family. But there were if's. There were and's. There were but's. They said, “Sure, Jesus' death on the cross can allow you to be adopted into our family, IF you get circumcised to show you are one of us. And sure, you can claim the Scriptures of law and prophecy and wisdom as your own AND you need to be able to follow all of them the

way we do. And you can worship with us and join our community with freedom, BUT there are certain holy days and festivals and sacrifices still to be made in order to keep up your status as Christians. The main issue was circumcision. This is the one that they were trying to catch these Christians early on. But Paul took this head on and said, "Look! If you give in on this one demand, the slope of if's, and's, and but's is slippery and never-ending..."

...and, we are all too familiar with this slope in our own lives of faith as well, aren't we?

All around us, even in our lives of faith, we communicate a message of unworthiness unless we succumb to the temptation to start keeping score, if only for ourselves.

As we look more closely at this passage together, I want to touch on three of the words. I want to look at the word *again* in verse 1. I want to look at the word *hope* in verse 5. And I want to look at a word that completely shifts Paul's tone and direction in this passage as he begins to wrap up the letter. You can make your guesses. And you'll probably be right.

Growing up, I had a very positive outlook on my church. We hardly ever missed a Sunday. I remember when I was in 5th or 6th grade, sitting in the balcony, just curved enough that I could see my good friend across the other side, both of us in the front row. That was the best row, because you could tear tiny little pieces off the bulletin, and when the adults were looking the other way, drop them over the edge and let them float down below. My friend and I would take turns, each time tearing off a little bit bigger piece. Afterwards, my parents would talk so someone downstairs who would return what amounted to almost a whole bulletin back to my parents. But it was a place of grace. I was nurtured in that place. I learned about Jesus. I knew that God loved me.

When I was in my first year of high school, I was asked to babysit for the two young sons of one of the pastors who was only around for a short time. I remember it was one of their birthdays, and he showed off the card he got from his grandmother with a whole \$5 bill inside. He was so proud. It went well, I thought. We played legos for about 3 hours. It was one of my first times babysitting.

Several Sundays later, this same pastor was preaching and I remember he began to tell a story. He began to tell about a babysitter he had recently. When he mentioned it was on the birthday of one his sons, I was at that point paying extra close attention, expecting to

hear some kind of secret compliment that only I would know about. Instead, he went on to say that the babysitter had taken the \$5 bill out of his child card, and that he would not be invited back. I felt like disappearing. I had no idea what had happened to the \$5, and he had never approached me or my parents about it. And he may not have had any idea how long I would carry that around with me before I told anyone about it.

It wasn't the message of grace I was waiting for. Someone had cut in on me and sent me a message that there was a part of me that was not acceptable. It was unfixable, I had no idea how to make it right, except perhaps to try harder, prove myself in other ways. Here's the good news, though, for me personally. I was also surrounded by leaders among me in the church that had no idea about this that knew how to be as persistent as Paul. There were so many other moments that I failed as well. But there were just as many gifts that I received of pure grace and reminders that it is for *Freedom* Christ has already set me free! The contrast of my own unworthiness (in many ways, not just that one isolated example) with the real grace I was offered...those were experiences of freedom. I felt like I could conquer the world, and it didn't have to start with something *I* had to do, because Jesus had done it already.

How simple is that first line of our passage, but how profound. I mean, it really is redundant if you think about it. In fact it's so painfully obvious. If you reverse it, it reads: *Christ has set us free...for freedom*. The object of the sentence and the action are the same root word in the Greek. It would be as obvious as saying, *I board a sailboat...to sail*. It is in fact so obvious, that Paul is actually taking one more stab at driving this home. You board a sailboat to sail. But, guess what, new believers? You are on the sailboat, but you're not sailing. If you want freedom, if you want to sail, you have to untie the boat from the dock of doubt about your salvation, and you have to open up the sail of trust in a God who has more than enough wind to make it a great adventure.

For *freedom*, Christ has set you free.

--- AGAIN ---

That's only the first half of the verse though. Paul is still on his mission to warn them that there is a threat to the freedom, all around them. Don't put yourselves back in chains. Now the word *again* in this passage is interesting. *Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*. Did he already warn them once and they forgot? No. More likely Paul is referring to who they were before they knew Christ at all. It was a different kind of slavery. Before they knew Christ, they were surrounded by a

world that said you can do whatever you want. Follow our pagan God's, idolize the things in this world that will make your wealthy, or will make your feel good in the moment, or will numb the pain. Idolatry was the way of the world. In many ways, it still is. Then they met Christ. Or rather, they met people who knew people who had met Christ...in person. And this message of grace and of invitation into a community of believers where the Holy Spirit was alive and moving was attractive. But, then alongside them were the Judaizers, with the if's, and's, and but's. So, to submit *again* to a yoke of slavery was to go back to a life of idolatry. Only this time, it wasn't a yoke put on them by people with no morals at all, but a yoke put on them by people that were *so* moral, that they equated their good behavior with their salvation. And Paul is crying out to them one last time before he shifts gears. Don't go back.

It is so easy to swing back and forth between these two kinds of slavery, between living a life of idolatry that the world offers to us in the form of worship of wealth, or sexuality, or food, or substance, or self-absorption to a life of idolatry of good Christian behavior that we think equals grace, but is really only possible in any meaningful way after we have received grace.

For freedom, Christ has set you free. There are true stories of people in prison so long, that once they are free, they don't know how to be free, how to live on their own. There are testimonies of people that say they actually had longings to return to their life in captivity. It doesn't make sense, but we all see it in ourselves and in those we know, returning to the very things that we *know* beyond doubt will enslave us again.

What's it going to take? A lot reminders, a lot time in Christian community reminding each other, and Paul has been reminding us for 4 and a half chapters, this being part of it, that our faith is based in grace and not in following ANY part of the law. As an aside, it bears also remembering that Paul never says that the law is bad. He would be the first to say, even sing from the heart with the Psalmist: "I delight in the law of the Lord" (Psalm 1:2). This is how the entire book of Psalms begins: Blessed is the man who does not walk in the ways of the wicked, or stand in the path of sinners, but his delight is in the law of the Lord.

You all and I know that there is only one kind of rule in which a person could find delight. It's the rule that brings life and joy when we follow it every time, but one in which we've been freed from the penalty by Someone who has already paid it. So when we follow it or when we fail, there is gratitude that draws us back.

--- HOPE ---

This brings us to the word *hope*. *For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly await the hope of righteousness.* "Hope" is actually is a reminder why it is often really hard to read the Bible in English. Think about the way we use hope. The biblical word for hope is a completely different meaning than the way we typically use it. In the bible, hope does not mean "there might be a chance and I'm longing for it," as in "I hope it is not over 100 degrees tomorrow," or "I hope my team wins the game." A wish, really. In Hebrews 11, it portrays a different kind of hope when the writes says that faith is being *confident* of what we hope for, and *certain* of what we do not see. Hope in this biblical sense is "total assurance."

Tim Keller says, "What is it that we await? Righteousness means more than goodness; it is a completely right record and right relationship with God. Paul is saying that we can live today in light of our certain, guaranteed, future glorification and welcome by God into His arms."

He goes on to say about those enslaved in both ways we've already mentioned: "Non-religious people have no idea where they will be a million years from now, and religious people without the gospel are anxious about where they will be, and cannot relax or look forward to it with eagerness."¹

What makes Christians unique from any other is our certainty in our God, our full assurance of hope. My personal favorite verse that Paul writes is in Romans and is the three-dimensional version of this assurance:

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."²

I think he pretty much covers everything. There is no "I hope so" that the English might lead us to believe. This is certainty. In what? That God's love is big enough. And when we get that, really get it, then we are ready for the final word, the word that changes the tone of the letter.

Just as nothing can separate us from the love of God. There is one thing that *should* separate us as Christians, should make us visible, in contrast to the rest of the world in a special way. And that's our *love* for others.

¹ Keller, Timothy. *Galatians For You*. Pg. 135-136.

² Rom 8:38-39

--- LOVE ---

Paul only uses the word love 5 times in the book of Galatians. The first time is in 2:20. "I have been crucified in Christ. It is no longer I who lives but Christ lives in me. The life which I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me." Really kind of a foreshadowing summary of what is to come after he repeats himself about the true gospel over and over. The other 4 times love is used are in Chapter 5, three of them in our verses today.

The first is in verse 6, when he says that nothing matters in our salvation, EXCEPT faith working through love. Does that mean love is an if, and, or but? No way. Because when we realize how much we are loved by God, real love is a natural outpouring of our lives into others. All of these reminders are leading somewhere Paul! We are finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. In Washington there is a tunnel that used to be for trains, but not it's for bikers. You have to have a headlight because it's 2 miles long, dead straight. As soon as the light from the entrance begins to fade, you see the smallest dot of light at the other end. It never seems to get bigger, until finally in the last couple minutes, it seems to jump out and the light rushes at you. If you're claustrophobic, this is like being reborn.

For several chapters we've been in a tunnel. Not that it's darkness. But the real light if God's love. I believe that Paul is saying if we really understand that Christ has freed us for the sake of freedom, and the depth of God's unshakable love, the light will explode around us, we will put aside our chains of idolizing the law or worldly things, and this final summed up command to love one another will make all the sense in the world.

Jesus actually beat Paul to it when he summed up the law into loving God and loving others. But Paul reiterates it here. When we understand that our uniqueness rests on our ability to spot the intruders to real grace in our lives, and that, like Zephaniah says, God takes great delight in *us, and even sings over us*, then the light will rush in, and we will remove any condemnation that we have previously given to others, and offer the same grace.³ This command is like a bright light that allows these new believers to live in a way that is going stand out from the rest of the world. Now Paul can talk about the fruit of the Spirit, and bearing each other's burdens, and avoiding certain things that help them in their community.

Four and a half chapters of the tunnel. The bright light comes now. Love will change things.

I said to someone recently, that as a pastor, I have find that what I think I am saying to someone in person or in front of a group is less and less frequently what is actually heard. Often people are looking for a specific agenda that either I did not intend or did not know that I had. In many ways, twenty years ago in ministry seemed like an easier time to communicate. I went on to say that at least this has made me rely more on what God is doing in and around me, and less on what I am doing or saying.

However, as I've thought more about that, I realize that saying that doesn't let me off the hook. Still, as a pastor, more than that, as a fellow follower of Jesus with all of you, I need to learn how to communicate love more and more effectively. I need to learn to offer that light at the end of what for many people is a very long, dark tunnel.

Often it requires patience, sometimes gentle steering in a different direction, and a willingness to be in relationship with people through the ups and downs of life.

Hey friends, let us learn how to be the church.

The church knows how to first receive love from a God that fiercely pursues it wherever it goes. I need help with this.

The church knows how to offer that love with a freedom, because Christ has set it free!

I need help with this as well.

But I am filled with *hope*.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Take another look at Galatians 5:1-15. Although Paul seems to be repeating a common theme, what do hear new in this passage?
2. In verse 3, Paul warns the Galatians that if they are circumcised, they will have to obey the entire law. What is Paul saying here? Are there parts of the law that we are not supposed to try to obey?

³ Zeph 3:17

3. Paul introduces the concept of love into this conversation of a gospel of freedom, in verse 6, and again in verses 13 and 14. What does love have to do with the way we receive or share the gospel?

4. In verse 9, Paul slips in a short analogy about yeast. What does this have to do with his message. Look up Matthew 16:11-12. How might he be borrowing Jesus' image?

5. What seemingly small ways do you tend to weave in messages of salvation by the law into your walk with Christ?

6. After all of this urging by Paul throughout Galatians to follow a gospel of grace, why does he now say he thinks (in verse 10) they will ultimately get it right? Why do you think he is suddenly confident in their response to this?

7. What does it look like to be slaves to one another (verse 13)? Why is this the final word on this argument about freedom in Christ? Does this make sense?

8. What are some ways that a gospel of grace can lead us to lives of love? What is a step we can take in our own lives to follow this final single commandment (verse 14)? What is a step we should take as a church in our community?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

If you had to bundle all the rules of the Bible into one rule, what would it be?
Read Galatians 5:14, and see if you agree with Paul. How can we live by this rule together as a family?