

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FREEDOM

GALATIANS 5:1-12

SINCE OUR FREEDOM COST JESUS EVERYTHING, WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO LIVE FREE AND STAY FREE.

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JESUS DIED SO WE COULD BE FREE. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO STAY FREE.

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The Responsibility Of Freedom

Galatians 5:1-12

So far in his letter to the Galatians Paul has defended his authenticity as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He said that he was personally commissioned by Jesus and the other apostles agreed that his commission was legitimate.

He then went on to argue philosophically, religiously, and anecdotally that we are saved only by grace through faith. Any attempt to add to or subtract from that doctrine of salvation is fatally and eternally wrong. In stating this proposition, it may sound to some that we are free to do anything we want. But in the rest of his letter, Paul is going to demonstrate what freedom in Christ looks like.

This wrong definition of freedom has infected western churches. We confuse our culture's definition of freedom, which really translates into self-centeredness and self-indulgence, with the Christian definition of freedom, which means free to pursue holiness and free to serve God because of our love for God and one another.

Let me give you an example. One of the members of our church ran into a streak of really bad luck. His business went bankrupt, his wife ran away with another man, and his doctor told him he had cancer. To top it all off, some robbers broke into his house, mugged him and stole some very valuable items.

I took one of my deacons with me to visit the man in the hospital. We sat with this man and listened to him recite these tragedies one by one.

After he recited each tragedy, the deacon responded, "Yes, ... but it could have been worse."

Finally, the unfortunate man couldn't take the deacon any more. He screamed at him, "How? How could it be any worse?"

The deacon, without even needing to think about it said, "It could have happened to me."

One of the main problems we face as Christians living in a country that emphasizes individual freedom and the pursuit of happiness is that we often translate these as God-given rights. However, as we will see in the last part of Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, freedom in Christ is something very different.

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I think our problem with understanding what freedom means in the bible is that we are a society of entitlement. In other words, we think that we are entitled to things in life. We are entitled to get whatever we want whenever we want. We think we are entitled to life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. Like I have said before, that makes us great Americans, but not very good Christians. In fact, if we are living self-centered, self-indulgent lives, we probably don't even know what authentic Christianity is. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **SINCE OUR FREEDOM COST JESUS EVERYTHING, WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO LIVE FREE AND STAY FREE.** Again, let me say, that since God bought our freedom, we need to understand how God has defined freedom. The Apostle Paul does a nice job of that in the rest of his letter to the Galatian churches.

In verses 1-4 he defines the nature of freedom. His point is this. **JESUS DIED SO WE COULD BE FREE. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO STAY FREE.** That sounds funny to us, "We are responsible to stay free." But I think that if we were to go back and study the Hebrews' journey through the wilderness after being freed from their oppressive slavery in Egypt, we can see a model of our own personal spiritual journeys from the oppressive bondage to sin, fear, Satan, the world, and death.

When things got difficult, their first instinct was to return to Egypt and once again submit themselves to slavery. We think life ought to be easy. When things get difficult, our first instinct is to go back to the slavery that Christ delivered us from.

In the first half of verse 1 we are reminded of the price of our freedom. This verse kind of summarizes what Paul has been saying all along, namely that authentic Christianity has nothing to do with our earning God's love or God's grace. It also is a transition into a description to what authentic Christianity looks like, namely that freedom in Christ manifests itself in a life lived out of love and gratitude for what Christ accomplished on our behalf. He starts out verse 1 by saying; "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." It is a very short and succinct sentence in Greek but very powerful.

First of all, let's think about what we were set free from. Because we were born with a bent towards sin, and since we have all personally sinned, harmed others, and offended God, we were under an eternal death sentence. We were all headed for an eternity in hell. Because of this, we experienced fear, and a compulsion to continue to reject God and rebel against Him. We defined this as bondage. Think about our society. We pollute our eyes, ears, hearts and minds with all sorts of sexual immorality. We call this the exercise of freedom. Men and women commit adultery, unmarried men and women feel free to have sex with any one they want to. Homosexuals feel free to claim they can believe in the God of the Bible while continuing to act out homosexually. Movies, music, and attitudes of our day are violent and sexually perverted, and our society defends this and encourages all of this in the name of freedom of expression. What is surprising is that people who claim to be bible-believing Christians think that they can be sexually immoral and still be in good standing with God. Mixing up western ideas of democracy with Christianity leads to people thinking that they can do what they want and at the same time be in a right relationship with God. Believe me when I say that in the United States, the statistics for heterosexual and homosexual immorality are about the same percentage inside the church as outside the church. Addictions to sex and pornography are about the same inside the church as outside the church. How can this be? It is because we mix up our ideas about democracy and freedom with Christianity.

What our society defines as freedom is actually bondage. If you are an unmarried heterosexual having sex outside of marriage, then you are in bondage. If you are a married heterosexual having an affair, cheating on your spouse, you are in bondage. If you are a homosexual and not abstaining from having sex, then you are in bondage. If you are watching porn or sexually chatting on the Internet, you are in bondage. I have used sex as the example because it is the most common sin of our time. But it really all boils down to the sense of entitlement we have. When we can't get what we want when we want it, we become angry, disturbed, depressed, and sometimes even violent. We are enslaved to our own lusts and desires.

Bear with me one more time as I say this. The only thing you and I are entitled to is an eternity burning in hell. That is the only thing we are entitled to. If you are a person who thinks they are entitled, you can never receive a gift because you think you are entitled to it. That's why it is so hard for people to become Christians. We must receive a gift. We don't deserve it. We are not entitled to salvation.

Here is the important point Paul is making. In order to free us from this bondage to sin and death, God did not just wave His magic wand and proclaim us to be right with Him. He freed us by an act of extreme sacrifice. Jesus left heaven, came down to earth and took on human flesh. He became fully man. He lived a life of self-sacrifice and service. He was betrayed, humiliated, tortured and executed. His

life and death were for the specific purpose of paying the price for the punishment we deserved. He died so that we could be free from the punishment of sin.

We receive this freedom only by receiving it as a gift from God. We are now free from the bondage of sin, this world, Satan, and death. We are now free to be in a right relationship with God. We are free to be holy and to pursue holiness. We are now free to love God and love one another.

And that brings us to the second half of verse 1. There is a responsibility to live free and to remain free. Look at the tone of the second half of verse 1. I'm going to point this out several times. The language is passive. He starts out with a positive command, "Stand firm." In other words, there are going to be challenges against our freedom. We are instructed to fight for our freedom. But look at the next phrase, "Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." Did you see the passivity in that? Don't let this happen to you. Don't let someone or something take your freedom away from you.

The Jewish-Christians had to come to the conclusion that they could never get right with God by keeping the religious laws of the Old Testament. They could only get right with God by putting their faith and trust in Jesus and His finished work on the cross.

Gentile-Christians had to let go of the notion they were cultured, educated, refined and good people. In fact they had to admit they were sexually immoral and worshiped false gods. They were made right with God when they placed their faith in Jesus and His finished work on the cross.

You and I had to leave all our ideas about being good people or living in a good country or following cultural traditions as a way of evaluating our lives. In fact, we had to admit that we are evil through and through. We deserve hell for an eternity. In other words, if we want to earn our salvation or pay our own debt of sin to God, it would take us an eternity in hell to pay that debt off.

But here is the problem. When we give our lives to Christ, He doesn't wipe our minds clean. He doesn't wipe all the information off the computer disc. When things don't go our way, or when we don't get things we want, we start to grumble and wonder why because Christians at all. And our inclination is to be tempted to go back to the things that used to give us pleasure or we follow the things the world insists will bring us pleasure and satisfaction.

But the Bible defines freedom like this. We are now free to serve Christ. We now have the ability to follow Jesus and to serve Him. We are free to love Him knowing that we are right with Him. Freedom means that we no longer have to follow Satan or the world. We are free to become the men and women God created us to be. And we are free to accomplish all the good works He prepared in advance for us to do.

In the days of Moses, the Hebrews were tempted to go back to their slavery in Egypt. In the Galatian churches, the Jewish-Christians were tempted to go back to the Law of Moses. The Gentile-Christians were tempted to embrace the Law of Moses and turn back to some of their idolatrous ways. When things get tough, we too are tempted to let the world convince us that its ways provide more pleasure and satisfaction than does God's ways. With Paul, I'm encouraging us to stand firm.

Verses 2-4 remind us that freedom in Christ means freedom to choose. I love the way the NIV translates the first phrase in verse 2, "Mark my words!" In old Bible language, the word was translated, "Behold!" More modern day language may say, "Lookie here!" Here comes that passive language again, "if you let yourselves be

circumcised." It's passive in the sense that Paul is saying, "Don't submit to people's demands that you be circumcised." Let me make this point. There is nothing wrong with the procedure of circumcision. Many countries do it as a matter of routine. It has been thought to be a matter of health. What Paul is saying here is that they should not be circumcised as a religious act as if it would make them more holy or acceptable to God. In verse 3 he goes on to say that if they submit themselves to circumcision, then they were accepting the whole notion that we restore our broken relationship with God by being religious or obeying religious rules.

Paul's point is clearly stated twice in these three verses. At the end of verse 2 he says that, "Christ will be of no value to you at all," and at the end of verse 4 he says that they will be, "alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." In other words, he is telling them if they try to do anything religious to make themselves more acceptable or loved by God, then the death of Jesus on their behalf cannot be used. In other words, if they want to earn their salvation, they cannot be saved by Jesus.

The other phrase is even more tragic. Paul says that if they now try and earn their salvation by submitting to religious rules, then they have alienated themselves from Jesus. Let's talk in terms of cutting. Circumcision is the cutting away of foreskin. What Paul is saying is that when they cut away the foreskin of their penises, they are cutting themselves off from the grace that Jesus has given them.

Here is one of those verses that we should tuck away for our theological studies. Even though it is not Paul's purpose in this verse, the verse clearly indicates that they could lose their salvation. Some people believe the bible teaches that one can never lose their salvation. Other people believe the bible teaches that one can lose their salvation. I don't think the problem is solvable, nor do I think it is meant to be solved. I think that when we come upon these verses, we should read them in context and let them say what they are saying. It seems that Paul is saying there are two views of salvation. The first view says that human beings have to be religious, be good, and do good things in order to be right with God and get to heaven. The other view says that we can never be good enough, religious enough, or ever do enough good things to be right with God. In fact we are doomed to spend eternity in hell. This view goes on to say that by receiving God's free gifts of reconciliation and eternal life in heaven in faith is the only way to be right with God.

Jesus' circle of influence extends to those who place their faith in Him. If one wants to earn their salvation in any way, then Jesus' circle of influence doesn't reach there. Choosing to be religious or adding to the work of Jesus cuts us off from Jesus' circle of influence, thereby cutting us off from His grace and salvation. Our mission is to remind ourselves of what it cost Jesus to set us free. We are to stand firm by continually reminding ourselves that we can only be saved by placing our faith in Jesus and His finished work on the cross on our behalf. **JESUS DIED SO WE COULD BE FREE. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO STAY FREE.**

This next section is fascinating. I am going to do my pathetic best to interpret it for you. However, it is much deeper and much profound than I can express in words. Verses 5-6 describe a life of freedom. In other words, **LIVING FREE IN CHRIST BRINGS FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE.** In almost all weddings, you will hear I Corinthians 13 read. It is the great love chapter. The interesting thing about this chapter is that Paul is not talking about the love of a husband and a wife. He is talking about love in the context of how we are to love one another in church. In light of what I'm preaching here this morning, I would encourage you to go back and reread I Corinthians 13. In describing an authentic Christian community he says,

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (I Corinthians 13:13 / NIV).

Attitudes of faith, hope, and love; that’s what characterizes a mature, healthy Christian community. Look at verses 5-6. The beginning of verse 5 starts out with faith, the end of verse 5 ends with hope, and the end of verse 6 ends up with love. Faith, hope, and love: and the greatest of these is love. Isn’t that interesting? I don’t have time here but the phenomenologists talk about time differently than we in the west view time. We view time as a linear sequence of events. The phenomenologist understands time as a flow in which the present is a fluid motion of the retention of the past and the protending of the future. Without getting too complicated let me state it like this. A whole symphony is contained in each single note. Each painting is contained in a single stroke of the brush. For Christians, we live out our lives in love based on our faith in the past work of Christ and our hope in the future work of Christ. Salvation is a constant interaction between what Christ has done in the past for us, what He is doing in our lives now, and what He will do for us in the future.

Let’s start out with faith in the first part of verse 5. We enter a right relationship with God by placing our faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross for us. We are who we are today because of a time in which we gave our lives to Jesus in faith and asked Him to take up residence in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. At some point God started a good work in us. Because God started that work in us, we look forward to the day He will complete the good work in us. That is the hope described in the last phrase of verse 5. We will be perfect when we see Him face to face either when He returns for us in the rapture or when we die. We know we will someday join Him in heaven and live with Him forever. That’s why we live in hope. Hope is not magical thinking. Living in hope is living in anticipation of that day in which we will be perfect.

Verse 6 describes the conclusion of love. Based on the facts that we have been made right with God and that someday we will meet Him face-to-face and live with Him in heaven, we now live lives that are motivated and energized by love. Here is what the Christian life is all about. I now try to do good not because I’m trying to earn my salvation or a place in heaven. I already am going to heaven. I try to do good because I’m in love with God. I’m grateful for what He has already done in my life and what He has already promised to do in my life. I can live without fear. I am truly free to love God and to love others. I pursue a holy life out of love, not out of trying to make myself acceptable to God. I think we have to understand this.

LIVING FREE IN CHRIST BRINGS FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE. As I said at the beginning of this section, I think there is a lot here that I have not been able to express. I think that section solves the faith versus works salvation issue. Works can never save us but a life of faith can’t help but express itself in works of love.

In verses 7-12, Paul reminds us that there is a commitment we have to make to freedom. **WE MUST BE CAREFUL TO PROTECT OUR FREEDOM.**

Verses 7-9 remind us that diligence is required. I don’t want you to miss the personality of Paul, so I am going to point out all his sarcasm. Again, I don’t think we can justify our own sarcasm by saying that Paul did it.

In verse 7 he puts a race in the minds of the Galatians. He says, “Picture a running race. Each of you is in your own lane. All of a sudden, someone cuts in on your lane and forces you off the track and you lose the race. The other guy may be disqualified, but you lost too.”

Out of all the possible metaphors available to him, he uses the picture of someone cutting in. Now the word cut in means to hinder or block. So other translations translate this as, "Who hindered you or who blocked you?" But I think the NIV gets it. The word used here comes from the same word group that the word castrate comes from in verse 12. He is playing here with their minds. By allowing these legalists to cut in on your penis, they are actually cutting you off from following Christ. Going back to some idea of becoming right with God by being religious is to get off track from running our race for Christ. We become disqualified. We are off track. If we start thinking that we are better than anyone else or somehow we are more righteous or good than anyone else, then we have started to run the wrong race. That will get us disqualified from salvation. Here is a good test. Someone asks us, "Are you going to heaven? You seem like a pretty good person." Our answer must be, "I am not good enough to get to heaven. I am only good enough to get to hell. But thank God for the finished work of Christ on the cross for me. I am going to heaven only by the grace of God."

Look at how seriously Paul takes that answer in verse 8. If we even come to ever think that we should get to heaven because we are good or religious, we are doomed. You can't mix authentic Christianity with anything else. The formula for salvation cannot be Jesus + anything else. The formula for salvation is Jesus alone.

In verse 10-11 Paul is confident. First of all, Paul is confident that the people he is writing to in the Galatian churches made an authentic confession of faith. He believes that they are true believers. They may have been thrown into a little confusion, but he is confident that when they read his letter, they will get it and get back on track right away. He addresses them as brothers and sisters in verse 11. He is making it clear to his fellow Christians that they must be careful not to add anything to faith in Christ. Paul is saying, "Look, my life would be a lot easier and a lot more fun if we could legitimately add this seemingly little act of religion. But we can't. We must preach and believe in Jesus alone. Because of that, I am persecuted." Paul is confident that God will complete the good work He started in each one of them.

Here is what it means to be confident from our point of view. We bet everything we have on Jesus. We don't hedge our bets. That means we cannot give our lives to Jesus in faith, and then because we are superstitious add other things to it for good luck. There are so-called Christians that consult their horoscopes. There are so-called Christians that try to follow Christianity and other religious practices. It is faith in Jesus Christ and nothing else that will save us. Not all religions are equal and not all religions are correct. I'm sorry to have to say this yet one more time. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 / NIV).

Don't ever be confused or let our society, culture, or even family members get you off track. We may suffer for believing this but it doesn't change the truth.

And in verse 12 Paul tells us to be persistent. These religious people will sound convincing. They may even sound noble. But we must resist. Again, I don't think this is the way we should respond, act, or talk. Nevertheless, Paul gets very sarcastic here. He says, "As for those guys who want to cut the foreskin of your penises, they should go all the way on themselves. They shouldn't stop at their foreskins, they should go and cut off their penises and their testicles. They should cut off the whole package."

Even though Paul is being sarcastic and pretty vulgar, his statement is rich in meaning. First of all, the Gentile Christians would be acquainted with a religion in

the nearby city of Phrygia called Cybele (*kubélā*). The priests of this religion would completely castrate themselves in dedication to their goddess. The Gentile-Christians would say, "I know that ain't right."

To the Jewish-Christians who heard Jesus preach and confront the religious scribes and Pharisees, they may remember when Jesus said, "³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." So if this whole circumcision thing is causing you to stumble, just go ahead and cut off the whole package. Then there won't be any confusion.

But for the Jewish-Christians, that would even be more horrific. In Judaism, men who didn't have testicles or had deformed testicles couldn't participate in temple worship. It would be bad enough to have your package cut off, but then to be cut off from worship would be even worse. Paul has laid it out in a very vivid and vulgar way. You can hear every male in the congregation groan as this is read and every female blush. For Paul in order to be a Christian, one must never pursue holiness in order to be saved. One should live free in Christ and live a pure and holy life only motivated by love for Jesus and love for humanity. There will be many people who try to get us off course and bring us back to a life of bondage. That is why **WE MUST BE CAREFUL TO PROTECT OUR FREEDOM.**

We will move from here next week into some of the behaviors that will characterize people who live their lives as a love response to what God has already done on their behalf in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But for now remember, **SINCE OUR FREEDOM COST JESUS EVERYTHING, WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO LIVE FREE AND STAY FREE.**

We have said all along that living free in Christ is a choice that we must make daily, hourly, and even moment-by-moment. Listen how C.S. Lewis describes it in his book [The Joyful Christian](#):

"People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, 'If you keep a lot of rules, I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.' I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a Heaven creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is Heaven: that is, it is joy, and peace, and knowledge, and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other."

We must learn to live free in the grace of God. If we do, we can then extend grace to others. Once we receive the love of God by grace we can extend love to others. Living in Christ is truly all about living as a love response to God.