

## **The Loss of Freedom**

Galatians 2:1-5

There is a lot of interest in our country about the protection of our freedom. And related to that, a lot of fear. There is a lot of fear of increasing government regulations and government oversight. Many people are fearful in their concern about an eventual governmental takeover of the healthcare system, fearing that system will eventually be under the control of political bureaucrats rather than medical professionals. There is a fear of restrictions upon free speech, a fear of reduced freedom of religion, a fear of a loss of freedom of privacy, a loss you feel whenever you go into an airport. There is a fear of excessive taxation, a fear of expanded IRS authority, a fear of judicial activism on the Supreme Court. I could go on and on. But my goal this afternoon isn't to stir up your political sensitivities, but to use that fear as an illustration of what we really ought to fear as Christians—an appropriate fear of the loss of our freedom as Christians.

Christian freedom, Christian liberty it is sometimes called, is a vital part of healthy, happy and holy Christian life. And yet, that freedom is often threatened. It is threatened whenever anything you are required to do is identified as the means by which you are justified. If the forgiveness of your sins and your acceptance before God is dependent upon some measure of your own performance, then Christian freedom is lost. The result is, by definition, bondage. In the realm of our relationship with God, it is one or the other. Freedom or bondage. Freedom or slavery. So Paul calls the threat that the Galatians faced the threat of slavery.

v.4

And he raises the stakes, so to speak, by putting this argument in terms of the gospel. The gospel itself is at stake.

The truth of the gospel was in danger of being denied, according to verse 5. It is that important an issue. And that is why this letter is being written.

I chose to preach on the book of Galatians in the afternoon service at the same time as I preach through Deuteronomy in the morning, because I wanted to avoid this fear. I want to avoid any implication of this loss of freedom. Exodus was a book about God's law being given to God's people. They were a people redeemed by grace, saved by grace, delivered out of the bondage of Egypt. That is how the ten commandments began, and that is the context for every one of those commandments. I believe it is important to study them in detail because those commandments teach us how to love God. And how to love him the way he wants us to love him. That's what love really is, isn't it?

That's what the law does for Christians. It teaches us how to love God. But there is a danger in the study of the law. It is the danger of unduly focusing our attention upon the law, especially in a rather rigorous description of the requirements of that law. It is the danger of thinking, or even feeling, that you have to do something to earn God's favor; that you have to accomplish something or perform something before God will love you or forgive you your sins. And you feel the burden of that slavery, because you know you can never do enough. So an emphasis upon the law makes you fear the loss of freedom.

Sadly, because of that fear, many preachers no longer preach on the law at all anymore. But if I am to preach the whole counsel of God, that is not a legitimate option. So we will have an extended emphasis upon the law from the book of Deuteronomy. And we will have this reminder from the book of Galatians of,

### **I. THE NEED FOR VIGILANCE...**

...against any legitimate loss of Christian freedom. And that's why we need to study this book. The need for vigilance to be sure that the impression is never left with God's people that what they do contributes to the ground of their standing before God.

For Paul, that need for vigilance was so pronounced that he says of his own ministry, "If the people lose their freedom, my work in the ministry would be in vain." "If the people submit themselves again to the slavery of the necessity of their own performance of good works in order to be justified, then I have run in vain."

His whole ministry would be judged to be lost, if he lost this very point. I, therefore, would have to say the same thing of myself. If I miss this point, if I get this wrong, if I deny the true Christian liberty of the gospel, then all my work is in vain.

v.1-2

Last week I emphasized the importance of that period of 14 years, which emphasized that Paul's authority did not come from any man, but from God. Paul learned his gospel from God, spending up to three years in the desert, alone, before going up to Jerusalem. And only after 14 years did he again go to Jerusalem, in order to assume apostolic authority within the church. He was joined by Barnabas and Titus. It is likely that this trip is the one mentioned in Acts 15, when the elders and apostles met at the council of Jerusalem. The issue was clearly identified,

Acts 15:7 "And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 10 Now

therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

And the conclusion was equally plain,

Acts 15:24 "Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment— 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well."

So as Paul writes about that same issue to the Galatians, he stresses again that,

#### **A. The authority of the apostles is from God.**

That is how he expresses his vigilance, his care in teaching on this subject, by emphasizing that the authority is not his own. The teaching is not his own. The doctrine is not his own. His ministry is not his own. Note verse 2, he went to Jerusalem as instructed by revelation.

And the focus of that gospel as an invitation to Gentiles was likewise shown to be an emphasis from God himself. By revelation from God, Paul understood that the gospel would be proclaimed to all nations, Jews and Gentiles. And the freedom

we have as Christians equally extends to both Jews and Gentiles. In this context, that meant that Gentiles did not have to submit to the regulations of the Old Covenant ceremonial law, regulations which were summarized by the Jewish duty of circumcision.

The authority is from God. And Paul shows us,

### **B. The necessity of careful instruction.**

All of these words describe that care. For Paul, it included the care of submission to his fellow apostles and elders, setting before them or presenting to them the gospel he taught, submitting his teaching to the other apostles, to be careful that he was not teaching in error. That principle is carried out today through the work of our presbytery. I am not free to teach, or to believe, whatever I want without submitting myself to the brothers. We must always preserve that commitment to careful instruction. There is no room for private, independent contractors in the ministry of the gospel. There must be no interest in novelty.

Jude 3 “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Now, all of that is really an introduction to the one main truth of this text. Freedom. Specifically, as I have already mentioned,

## **II. FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY.**

That’s what this is all about. Freedom and slavery. So let’s look at those two diametrically opposed things more closely, beginning with,

### **A. The definition of bondage.**

The word is used in verse 4. And look at how disastrous it is. First of all, the trouble makers are described as false brothers.

That’s very strong language. It is not a description given with the charity of true Christian fellowship. False brothers, those not even recognized as true believers. And their motives are devious. They were “secretly brought in,” they “slipped in to spy out our freedom...” So they came in secretly rather than openly. They were not identified nor identifiable by their error. They sneaked into the fellowship of the church, and there is nothing in those words but criticism for their actions and their teaching. They didn’t announce themselves as teaching contrary to the apostles. They didn’t stand up and declare themselves to be subverting the doctrine of justification by faith. They just infiltrated the Galatian churches and began their destruction.

They slipped in to *spy out* our freedom. The idea there is to plot against our freedom, to undermine our freedom. They were doing it intentionally, with specific purpose. They didn’t confront the apostolic leaders with a debate or anything of a public discussion. They were subversive and secretive and deceptive.

And all for the purpose of bringing us into slavery, according to verse 4. Doesn’t Satan still work that way today? Isn’t false doctrine usually introduced in just that same way. Subtly, secretly, discreetly. So let me be sure that you understand what this bondage was all about. On the surface, where the issue became evident, was obvious. It was the requirement imposed upon Gentile Christians to be circumcised. But it wasn’t simply a matter of circumcision. It was the whole of the Old Covenant ceremonial system which, in its time, was the appropriate preparation for the coming of Jesus. But now that Jesus is come, that whole ceremonial system is obsolete, and if it were to be kept, then it would cease being a type and shadow of Jesus and, instead, be a rejection of Jesus. The Old Covenant people of God were required to be circumcised as an outward testimony of God’s covenant promise which was fulfilled in Jesus. Now that

Jesus has come, any obligation to perform those rituals becomes an act which attempts to do what Jesus has already done. An act which somehow merits your salvation for you. And that becomes bondage, because once there is one requirement which you must do, the question can always be asked, “Did you do it well enough?” And, “Is there anything else that you must do?” Or similarly, the question, “Have you done enough?”

If you have to do anything at all to be saved, then the burdensome bondage is always laid upon you, “Have you done enough?” “How much is enough?” “How good is good enough?”

Beloved, those questions are the essence of bondage because you can never give a final, satisfactory answer.

When I was in college, I was an engineering major, and as difficult as those classes might have been, my seminary classes were actually much more difficult. And here is why. In engineering, in math especially, you calculate an answer and then your work is done. I always knew when my homework was done. If I had 30 problems to do, once I got 30 answers my work was done. Complete. Finished. But when I got to seminary, I lost that freedom of actually being able to finish my homework. The work of writing a paper was never finished. I could always improve it. I could always spend more time on it. I simply chose to stop working on a paper when the allotted time was up and the paper was due. But never did I think I had actually finished the assignment completely. I have that same experience every time I prepare a sermon, still, after these many years. I finish my work on Saturday night each week, but not because I have achieved any sense of perfection, but because I am simply out of time.

That’s the bondage, the slavery, of justification by works. You are never perfect enough. You can never do enough. You can

never finish everything you are obligated to do. There is always the burden of just a little bit more, just a little bit better. And that is the bondage and slavery Paul addresses with the Galatians.

And so, turn to,

Gal. 5:1 “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. 2 Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. 3 And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. 4 You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.”

That’s about as straightforward as it can be, isn’t it? If there is one requirement of the law necessary for your justification, then you are subject again to a yoke of slavery.

Now, let me say clearly, but just in passing today, that this freedom is no excuse to sin. Paul will answer that objection and I want to say it today very distinctly. This freedom is not the freedom to sin, the freedom to do whatever you want in disobedience to God’s moral law. But the point is that that law, and all the stipulations of that law, are not the foundation upon which you are accepted by God. And if they were, THEN you would be under the bondage of that law and your freedom would be destroyed.

In that bondage, in that slavery, you would lose the primary definition which the gospel gives to your relationship with God, namely the definition of adoption, the definition of being sons and daughters, the definition that comes to those who are able to call God “Father.” If you are trying to perform any good work in order to achieve a right relationship with God, then you are in the bondage of slavery that requires you to obey the law perfectly. If

your standard is your own work, then the bondage is in the duty of absolute and unqualified perfection. And you lose the privilege of those who are adopted to be sons and daughters.

It is bondage, of course, because it is impossible. Because of your sinfulness, the standard of perfection is impossible. Even the secular psychologists of our day understand the dangers of perfectionism, don't they? Perfectionists are enslaved by a pursuit that amounts to nothing less than slavery. You become enslaved to the very thing you are unable to do, perfection. It is a vicious, vicious cycle. And as terribly destructive it is in terms of personality on a merely secular level or psychological level, how deadly it is when that sense of perfectionism creeps into your Christian faith.

And it does! When you struggle with the inability to know and believe that God loves you, this is no doubt, at the very root of that struggle, this false doctrine that creeps in unawares, this bondage. If you believe, or think, that you have to do something or accomplish something before God will love you, then you know this bondage. And I expect you know the frustration of that bondage.

But let's look at the glorious alternative which the gospel offers. Freedom. Liberty. And what is...

### **B. The definition of liberty.**

Turn first, please, to,

Rom. 8:15 "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba! Father! 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."

As Christians, you are children, not slaves! You cry out to Abba, Father. And what gives you that right? What gives you that privilege? What gives you that freedom? God himself, in the gospel of grace!

You didn't earn that privilege and you don't deserve it. You don't do anything in order to merit. That's why circumcision was such a big issue for Paul, for that is what it had become in the churches of Galatia. It became a bondage that denied and destroyed true Christian liberty. So go back to our text.

v.3

Paul would not submit himself to that bondage, that slavery. He would not subject himself to the outward ceremony of the Old Covenant system that was now obsolete with the arrival of Jesus in the flesh, for if he did, he might as well bring back the whole system. If you submit to one outward ritual as being necessary for your justification, then you submit to them all. And Christ will be of no advantage to you. "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace."

But liberty, glorious liberty, you are free from that bondage! Verse 4, "our liberty that we have in Christ Jesus." Let me define that freedom in the words of our Westminster Confession of Faith. I do so with this awareness, that the Confession is not above the Bible nor in any way equal to the Bible in its authority. Rather, the Confession is what our church has determined and declared to be the standard exposition of the Bible. So in reading the Confession, I am expounding that which is taught in the Bible, put into a logical and topical form for our benefit. So here is what the Confession says, explaining and expounding what the Scripture teaches about Christian liberty. Chapter 20: "The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in

their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind.”

Beloved, that freedom is the very essence of the gospel itself. And, therefore, with Paul, I am devoted to the work of,

### **III. PRESERVING THE TRUTH.**

Paul is so strenuously presenting his point so as to protect the Galatians from these false teachers. He is self-consciously seeking to preserve the truth of the gospel.

v.5

There is no question here about,

#### **A. The need to oppose false teachers.**

Again, verse 4, they are false brothers! Their goal is to bring the people of God, the children of God, into slavery. And so stood up to them and would not yield his conscience in submission to them, according to verse 5. He defies them and defies their teaching. This is godly, manly leadership at its very finest. Yes, he is confrontational. Yes, he is combative. Yes, he is dogged in his determination to rid the church of this scourge. He will not allow these false teachers to maintain their secrecy nor allow them to preserve their pretense of credibility. He will not allow them to teach nor allow their teaching to go unanswered.

His goal, above all else, comes from,

#### **B. The need to preserve the truth of the gospel.**

And that is what is at stake. The truth of the gospel.

Let me bring all of this up to today, to our own experience. I believe God has established the sacrament of baptism, as the sign of his covenant promise to us and to our children. But beloved, being baptized is not a act that you perform that earns for you your standing before God.

I would dare say the same thing about church membership. As high a view as I have of church membership, as much as I believe the Bible teaches us to be joined together in a body in submission to the oversight and care of ordained elders in a church, church membership is not a good work that secures for you your salvation.

There are other dangers, aren't there? Other things we elevate in our experiences to be a necessary mark of Christian identity. What sort of clothes you wear. How long your hair might be. Whether or not you homeschooled your children. How you raise your children. How many children you have. Your political party affiliation. Your political activity. How many Bible verses a week you can memorize. How many chapters of the Bible your read each day. How many days each week you have your daily devotions. How many people you witness to every week.

I grew up getting a pin for perfect attendance in Sunday School. I got a lot of pins. Year after year, perfect attendance. I still have those pins. But do you know what? Every year in which I received a pin, I was still lost in my sins and unbelief. I had perfect attendance at church, and Sunday School, but I was dead in my sins.

It isn't my Sunday School pins that will get me to heaven. It is Jesus.

But still, it's easy to judge one another. You elevate certain things as if by performing a certain way, by accomplishing certain external benchmarks, you put yourself in this category and you judge others in a lower category.

Or, you feel your own shortcomings and judge yourself as a failure. Either way, this loss of freedom is a devastating experience, whether you impose it upon others by judging them, or impose it upon yourself by condemning yourself. Either way, it is a deadly affliction.

Gal. 5:1 "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."

And if you are a Christian, then this is your freedom, that you, through Christ, are the children of God, freed from the condemnation of his wrath. And, therefore, that you have the freedom to cry out to him, Abba Father, knowing that he loves you as his children, for the Bible tells you so.

With the Apostle Paul, it is that truth of the gospel which I will defend and preserve for the benefit and protection of your soul.