

Galatians

Freedom in Christ (Part One)

Galatians 5:1-6

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June 12, 2005

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Scripture

About seventy years ago a poor prospector named Jakobus Jonker worked tirelessly searching for fortune on his small farm in South Africa. After a typical, sudden, frightening thunderstorm, Jakobus walked out onto his land to see if the rain washed up anything. Eventually, he came across an unusual stone, the size of a hen's egg. He picked up the stone, wiped off the mud, and gasped. It looked like a diamond! Trembling with excitement, he rushed home to show the stone to his family. A few days later he sold the "stone"—a 726-carat diamond—for an incredible \$315,000.¹

What would you do if you were in Jakobus Jonker's shoes? Would you do everything you could to protect that stone? I bet you would! You would probably find the most secure vault you could to safeguard the treasure.

But what if you found something even more precious than a huge diamond? Suppose you discover the priceless gift of freedom in Christ? Through Christ, and only through Christ, you realize that you can be free—really free. So you reach out your empty hands and receive this precious gift. Would you guard this treasure? Would you do all you can to keep thieves from breaking in and taking it away?

The Galatian Christians did have this precious jewel. It is called the *gospel*. Yet, they allowed thieves—legalists—to break into their lives and rob them of their freedom in Christ. Shocked, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians, defending the gospel of grace and urging them to protect what was rightfully theirs.

Let's see how the apostle Paul put it in Galatians 5:1-6:

5 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

¹ Victor Argenzio, *Diamonds Eternal* (New York, NY: David McKay Co., 1974), 50-52.

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:1-6)

Introduction

The movie *Gettysburg* brings to life the three bloodiest days of American history. The first scenes take place a couple days before the epic battle at Gettysburg. Colonel Joshua L. Chamberlain of the 20th Maine Regiment learns that his regiment is going to receive 120 Union soldiers who mutinied. Chamberlain is given permission to shoot any of these mutineers who don't cooperate.

Chamberlain tells the men that he's been told about their problem. He admits, "There's nothing I can do today. We're moving out in a few minutes. We'll be moving all day. I've been ordered to take you men with me. I'm told that if you don't come, I can shoot you. Well, you know I won't do that. Maybe somebody else will, but I won't. So, that's that.

"Here's the situation," he continues. "The whole Reb army is up that road a ways, waiting for us. This is no time for an argument. I tell you, we could surely use you fellows. We're now well below half strength. Whether you fight or not, that's up to you. Whether you come along is. . . ." He pauses and then continues, "Well, you're coming. You know who we are. But if you fight alongside of us, there are a few things you must know."

Matter-of-factly, he states, "This regiment was formed last summer in Maine. There were 1,000 of us then. There are less than 300 of us now. All of us volunteered to fight for the Union, just as you did. Some came mainly because we were bored at home. . .

thought this looked like it might be fun. Some came because we were ashamed not to. Many of us came because it was the right thing to do. And all of us have seen men die.

“This is a different kind of army. If you look back through history, you’ll see men fighting for pay, for women, for some other kind of loot. They fight for land, power, because a king leads them, or just because they like killing. But we are here for something new. This has not happened much in the history of the world. We are an army out to set other men free.”²

The church is also a different kind of army. We are an army out to set other men free by the gospel of God’s grace.

Lesson

In Galatians 5, the apostle Paul continues his passionate plea for freedom. He longs to see men and women set free from bondage, and experience the freedom that only the gospel can bring. So, he begins with the thesis concerning our freedom, and then continues with the consequences of embracing works.

I. The Thesis Concerning Our Freedom (5:1)

First, Paul gives us the thesis concerning our freedom.

A. *The Statement (5:1a)*

Paul’s says in verse 1a: **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”**

At an *objective* level, **Christ has set us free** by dying on the cross and becoming our substitutionary sacrifice. **Christ has set us free** from sin’s penalty, divine wrath, Satan’s domination, and the Law’s curse. **Christ has set us free** from having to obey the law of God ourselves in order to be saved.

² *Gettysburg* (Turner Pictures, 1993), rated PG, written and directed by Ronald F. Maxwell.

Because of what Christ has done at an objective level, there comes a new *subjective* freedom. This involves being set free from the fear of ultimate judgment. Further, commentator John Stott points out, “What Christ has done in setting us free, according to Paul’s emphasis here, is not so much to set our *will* free from the bondage of sin as to set our *conscience* free from the guilt of sin.”³

What is important to note is that this **freedom** consists of a whole new motivation and reason for doing everything. If I were to ask the average person in Tampa, “What is a definition of freedom?” I would receive an answer like this, “Freedom is being able to do what I most want to do.”

But what Paul is saying is that in the gospel, and only in the gospel, do we receive true **freedom**. And we discover that true **freedom** means that pleasing and obeying *God* is what we most want to do. Why? Because God has changed our hearts.

Christ has set us free to enjoy a new kind of life—one in which our hearts are transformed by the gospel. We now live by the power of the Spirit, we joyfully obey God, we delight in loving and serving others, we commune with God in prayer, and we grow in our walk with God.

We have received the gemstone of the gospel. We did not pay a penny for it. We did not do a thing to earn it. Christ gave it to us absolutely free, although it cost him his life to purchase it for us.

B. The Command (5:1b)

“Stand firm, then,” commands Paul, **“and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery”** (5:1b).

In other words, we are to enjoy this glorious freedom that Christ has given to us by his sacrifice. Paul may be alluding to an ox that is burdened by a heavy yoke. Once the yoke is lifted, the ox is free to stand without this massive burden on its neck.

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 132.

Similarly, we were at one time burdened by a massive, oppressive reliance on the law as a means of attaining right standing with God. We felt the demands of the law, but we could not fully obey the law. And so we were subject to the condemnation of the law.

But Christ fully met the demands of the law for us. He died for our disobedience and thus bore our condemnation for us. And now he has removed the yoke from our shoulders and set us free so that we can stand upright. How then can we dream of putting ourselves under the law again and submitting to its cruel yoke?

New York Times reporter Nicholas Kristof chose two Cambodian prostitutes and attempted to buy their freedom from their brothel owners. He selected young women who were there against their will, willing to tell their story, and actually wanted to leave prostitution.

The first woman, Srey Neth, was a simple transaction. For \$150, Kristof left with the girl and a receipt. Srey Mom's situation proved more difficult, since the brothel owner demanded more money.

Kristof writes: "After some grumpy negotiation, the owner accepted \$203 as the price for Srey Mom's freedom. But then Srey Mom told me that she had pawned her cell phone and needed \$55 to get it back.

"Forget about your cell phone," Kristof said. "We've got to get out of here."

Srey Mom started crying. Kristof told her that she had to choose between her cell phone and her freedom. She ran back to her tiny room in the brothel and locked the door.

With Srey Mom sobbing in her room and refusing to be freed without her cell phone, the other prostitutes—her closest friends—began pleading with her to be reasonable.

Even the brothel owner urged her to "grab this chance while you can," but Srey Mom hysterically refused to leave.

Srey Mom only stopped crying when Kristof agreed to buy back the cell phone too. Then she asked for her pawned jewelry to be part of the deal.

Kristof reflected upon the complex emotions making the decision to leave the brothel so difficult.

“I have purchased the freedom of two human beings,” he wrote, “so I can return them to their villages. But will emancipation help them? Will their families and villages accept them? Or will they, like some other girls rescued from sexual servitude, find freedom so unsettling that they slink back to slavery in the brothels? We’ll see.”⁴

Sometimes we may resemble this woman. We want to go back to our works as the basis for our acceptance by God. That is why the apostle Paul urges us not to trade our newfound freedom for slavery again when he says, **“Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”**

II. The Consequences of Embracing Works (5:2-6)

But what if we allow a break-in, losing our freedom? What if we allow ourselves to be burdened again by a yoke of slavery? The apostle Paul spells out four consequences that come to those who embrace works as the basis for acceptance by God.

A. Christ Will Have No Value (5:2)

The first consequence of embracing works is that Christ will have no value.

The false teachers were teaching the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised in order to come into God’s favor. And so Paul says in verse 2, **“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.”**

⁴ Nicholas Kristof, “Bargaining for Freedom,” www.nytimes.com/2004/01/21/opinion/21KRIS.html?th.

When we slip back into seeking God's favor on the basis of our performance, we are saying that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is insufficient. Furthermore, we need to add some of our works, our righteousness to Christ's righteousness. We must add something to Christ's righteousness in order to pay fully the debt to God. As soon as we act as if our righteousness is needed, Christ becomes of no value to us at all.

Let me illustrate with an analogy. When my son Jon was a toddler, we bought him a bicycle for his birthday. The bicycle we bought him was the kind that we had to assemble. Jon was very excited when he received it, and he wanted to ride it right away. But, we had to assemble the bicycle first. Of course, Jon felt that he had to help me. Now, if I had assembled the bicycle and given it to him, it would have been assembled "perfectly." All he would have had to do is receive it as a gift. But because he wanted to assist me, the assembly of the bicycle became all messed up. His efforts made my work of no value. He had to step out of the way and let me assemble the bicycle and give it to him as a gift.

In the same way, Christ does not need our efforts to assist him in his work on our behalf. When we try to help we make his work of no value. We must get out of the way so that his work can be complete and perfect.

Now getting out of the way is hard to do. We are so oriented toward our own works and righteousness that it is hard for us to trust completely in the perfect righteousness of Christ on our behalf. But we must do so.

B. We Will Have to Keep the Whole Law (5:3)

The second consequence of embracing works is that we will have to keep the whole law.

Paul says in verse 3, **"Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law."**

Suppose I wanted to become a citizen of the United States. I would go to the office of Immigration and Naturalization Services. They would give me a list of regulations and procedures that I would need to do in order to become a naturalized citizen of this country. Now, let's say that after I became a citizen I then protested that I did not want to follow the laws of this country. What would you think of me?

“What a foolish fellow,” you would say, “Of course he has to obey not just the naturalization laws but *all* the laws of this country.”

Paul argued that if a man was circumcised he had put himself under an obligation to obey the whole law to which circumcision was the introduction.

When we move from the righteousness of Christ to our own righteousness, we place ourselves under an obligation to obey the entire law. If Christ's righteousness is insufficient, and we must add some of our own, it has to be a perfect righteousness in order to be acceptable to God. We cannot pick and choose which of the commands we will obey. We must obey every single one of them perfectly in order to be accepted by God.

C. We Will Fall from Grace (5:4)

The third consequence of embracing works is that we will fall from grace.

Paul says in verse 4, **“You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”**

God cannot accept us on the basis of our own righteousness. Why? Because even our best deeds are as filthy rags in God's eyes. Isaiah says that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

Have you seen those commercials on TV where they take two white garments that are filthy and wash them in separate washing machines using different detergents? One garment comes out

spotlessly clean; the other garment comes out with stains still on it. Of course, only the spotlessly clean one is acceptable.

When we are washed in the blood of Christ's righteousness we come out spotless and acceptable to the Father. But when we are washed in our own righteousness we come out still dirty and unacceptable to God. In fact, Paul says that when we seek to justify ourselves by our own righteousness we alienate ourselves from Christ, and we fall away from grace.

Now, let me clarify and say that this verse is *not* teaching that we can lose our salvation. Some have used this verse to support the theology that a Christian can lose his or her salvation. That is not true.

First, Paul is not saying that we have fallen way from *salvation* but that we have fallen away from *grace*.

Second, Scripture clearly teaches the doctrine called the "perseverance of the saints." After all, what does "eternal life" mean if not *eternal* life.

And third, Paul is not talking so much about *justifying* grace (that is, how a person *comes* into a right relationship with God), but rather, he is talking about *sanctifying* grace (that is, how a person *lives* in a right relationship with God). He is talking about grace that helps us live in a manner that is pleasing to him.

Once a person seeks to justify himself before God on the basis of his own righteousness, he alienates himself from Christ. It is like when Jon was trying to help me assemble his bicycle. When he wanted to do it in his way, I just had to stand back and let him try. After a while he got frustrated and realized that he *couldn't* do it. His efforts caused me to move out of the picture. I was, in a sense, alienated from what he was doing. And by trying to put the bicycle together himself he was in effect saying, "I don't need your help, Dad. I can do it myself."

He had to surrender and say, "Dad, I cannot put this bicycle together. Please put it together for me."

Then I could move back into the picture and do it for him.

D. *We Will Abandon Faith for Works (5:5-6)*

The final consequence of embracing works is that we will abandon faith for works.

Paul says in verse 5, **“But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.”** Our own self-righteous efforts leave us frustrated and discouraged. But when we trust Christ and his righteousness we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. This perfect righteousness will only come when we see Christ face to face. Until then, we must recognize that our own righteousness has no value. **“For in Christ Jesus,”** says Paul in verse 6, **“neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”**

Let me ask you a question: “What is the one thing you should do to make yourself a better Christian?” Author Paul Miller has asked this question to hundreds of people in seminars, churches and seminaries. People say, “Go to church, read the Bible, pray, study, obey, stop sinning, and so on.” Paul says that no one has ever said, “Faith.”

Jesus was asked this question you know. Just after he fed the 5,000 and walked on the water, the people caught up with Jesus and asked him, in John 6:28, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” And what did Jesus say? “Go to church, read the Bible, pray, study, obey, stop sinning, and so on”? No. Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to *believe* in the one he has sent” (John 5:29). The problem for us is that faith is very vague.

Galatians 5:6 is perhaps the key verse in the book of Galatians. Paul is saying that in this life there is only one thing that counts, and that one thing is **faith expressing itself through love**. I wish we had time to expand on this but we don't. Let me just say this. The Christian life is started by faith. We all agree with that. But what is so profound is that the daily Christian walk is also lived by faith. *Faith*, not obedience.

Let me try to paraphrase Galatians 5:6 in the Fritz Version: **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision (my righteousness) nor uncircumcision (my unrighteousness) has any value. The only thing that counts is faith (focusing on and remembering that my righteousness is in Christ when I am faced with failure or success) expressing itself through love (seeking God’s best for the other person).”**

You know, we often tend to think that works and performance is the problem of people who are not yet Christians. But, frankly, it is something with which Christians struggle too.

Let me give you some examples of my own struggles in this area, and see if you can identify with my struggles. Some time ago I was involved in a discipleship course in which I was given the assignment of spending one entire week without gossiping, complaining, blame shifting, defending myself, or boasting. I have to tell you that when I paid attention, I was appalled at myself. I noticed that every day I gossiped, complained, shifted blame, defended myself, and boasted. I could spend hours talking about my sin in these areas.

For instance, I had an appointment across town, and I arrived ten minutes late. I apologized for being late, and blamed the traffic for my being late. The truth of the matter is that I started ten minutes late because I was talking to a friend on the phone.

Here is another example: Eileen and I have a disagreement over an issue. I defend my position because I don’t want to admit my guilt and failure that caused the problem in the first place.

Or, how about this example: one time I was visiting some friends and when they asked about how things were going at church, I made sure that I told them everything so that I was put in the very best possible light.

Now, what am I doing in all of these instances? I am promoting my own righteousness. The truth is that we all do it! We all have more self-righteousness in us than most of us realize or want to admit. You see, self-righteousness feels good. Instead of making ourselves vulnerable, we close up and we put on an appearance of

“all’s well at home.” But it really isn’t. Not if we are really honest with ourselves.

That is why the gospel is such a precious gem. Why? Because the gospel is for sinners like me and like you! And once we become saved we are still sinners and we still need the gospel. The reason so many of us struggle with lives of failure and defeat is because we will not admit our failure and defeat. A pastor friend of mine once said that the only sin we really struggle with is the sin we cannot confess. That is true.

The gospel points us to Christ. We confess our sins and acknowledge our need of a Savior whose righteousness we desperately need. We put our trust in Jesus Christ whose perfect righteousness frees us from the demands of the law.

Conclusion

Whenever we trust our own righteousness we lose the freedom we have in Christ. The precious gemstone of the gospel is robbed from us ever time we fall into works righteousness. Our tendency is to promote our own righteousness that is deeply ingrained in each one of us.

Some of you have lost the joy of the gospel. The Galatians lost theirs when they embraced works (cf. Galatians 4:15). The Christian life for you is joyless. It is frustration. It is disappointment. It is powerless.

How do you recover your joy? *First, you must be willing to be completely honest with yourself.* You must look at yourself and see yourself as God sees you. You must see all your sin, your hypocrisy, your sham, your inability to be vulnerable.

Second, you must admit that you are a sinner. Admit your sin to God. He knows about it anyway. Confess your sin to him, and if you openly sinned against someone else, confess it to that person too.

And then, third, you must believe that Christ’s righteousness is all that you need. In fact, it is all that you will ever need. Go to

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the cross and thank God for Christ's sacrifice on your behalf. Thank him for his perfect righteousness that is credited to your account.

You must drink from the fountain of God's grace. The only place you will find your joy restored is at the foot of the cross. God meets sinners, new sinners (like some of you) and old sinners (like me) at the cross. That's the only place he meets us.

And it is there at the cross that we discover freedom in Christ. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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