

FOR FREEDOM YOU HAVE BEEN SET FREE
Galatians 5:1-13

Freedom is an issue that has become increasingly urgent to me. It started a few years ago, when at some point I realized the unbelievers I was hanging out with were a lot freer than the Christians I knew. And I don't just mean they could go to a bar and do whatever they wanted. I mean they were free to be themselves, to admit their faults and talk about politics and anything else. Meanwhile so many Christians have such a hard time being themselves because they're trying to live up to some image they've been told they're supposed to uphold. Something's wrong here! Why can't we live freely? Derek Webb talks about the curious re-definition of Christianity as learning how to hide our sins. But, that's actually the opposite of faith.

The theme of this passage is: You are really, truly, and completely free! Now the symbol of circumcision that Paul uses is a symbol of the law that certain misguided members of the church community in Galatia were trying to enforce on everyone. It's a symbol for us of all that people add to faith (a certain look or way of dressing, a quotient of Bible reading, music we listen to, outward actions). The critical question that was asked at the founding of the New Testament Church was, "What does it take to be a Christian?" And the answer, according to Paul and the other apostles, is faith in Christ alone!

In verse 2 Paul says (I'm paraphrasing), "If you start adding requirements to faith, Christ will be pointless to you." Why? Because it will be all about what you do. Remember the distinction we make between *religion and the gospel*. Religion says I am acceptable because of what I do, while the gospel says that I will never be acceptable based on what I do, but only on the basis of what Christ has done for me. When Christ dies on the cross, He proclaimed that "it is finished," yet we've been trying to add to His finished work ever since.

Paul re-emphasizes this faith alone theme in verse 3 (again I paraphrase), "If you do add things to faith, you better be prepared to go all the way." Don't pick and choose, if you're going to measure your spirituality against the law, you better keep the whole law. And who can stand against such a mammoth standard?

We learn 3 things from this passage that apply so well to the mission of Grace Stillwater in the middle of Oklahoma.

We Can Quit Pretending to Be Good

If we're honest, so many of us have to admit that we struggle with how to present ourselves-my *witness*. It concerns us and even burdens us (and is an easy thing for preachers to make us feel guilty about!). But Paul says in verse 4 that if you seek to be justified by the law you are, in effect, giving up on grace. Then in verse 5, Paul speaks of the hope of righteousness, which is a future hope. It's true that in God's eyes we are righteous, but we are far from perfect in this life. And the sooner we admit that, the better. The sooner we learn to confess our sins and inability to live up to the law, to the right 'image,' the more freedom and influence we will find.

Steve Brown (author of a great book called *A Scandalous Freedom*) says we ought to live our lives in such a way that uptight Christians will doubt our salvation. Because when they do, unbelievers will probably start believing we're real people and

that our God is a passionate God who enables us to really live. Here's the proof of the freedom pudding: Do you know any unbelievers who stayed away from Christ because we weren't holy enough? What keeps them away is pretense, not freedom! (I think what unchurched people are really afraid of is not Christ, but of coming to a church and being made to fit some nerdy, joyless image that God never designed them to be.)

In verses 8-12, Paul makes the point that this freedom issue affects the whole church ('a little leaven leavens the whole lump'). My prayer for our Church is to have an atmosphere of freedom- and our leaders must ensure that! We must be the proactive examples who are the first to confess our shortcomings and the last to shackle people with unbiblical regulations!

We Can Quit Needing to Fix People

Recently there have been a series of articles in the local paper that called Christians self-righteous and judgmental. A lot of what was said was right, though some of it was misinformed and short-sighted. For many of us, our first response is to want to defend ourselves and the church. But, you know, we don't have to. When we are secure in God's love and understand the freedom Christ won for us, we can take it on the chin. We don't have to correct or criticize everybody. Now, there are times for us to speak the truth in love, but sometimes we need to just forgive and move on.

Verse 6 is one of my favorite Pauline sayings because it gets to the heart of what the Christian life is about. Is it about looking a certain way? Is it about everybody having one hairstyle, one manner of dress, one radio station (CCM, of course), and a set reading list (consisting of Christian romance novels and apocalyptic hysteria)?

Often we try to make people in the church just like us because we're insecure. But all of these externals and non-essentials don't matter. *Only faith working itself out in love*. In fact, we should celebrate our diversity and the various callings God has put on our lives. Now, I don't think anyone is really arguing about circumcision, so what are some of the battles we can apply to this verse?

"Neither coat and tie nor blue jeans matter, only faith working through love."

"Neither seminary nor vet med school nor pharmacy school matter..." In other words, God calls each of us to different jobs and none is more spiritual than another.

"Neither homeschooling nor public school nor classical Christian school matter..."

"Neither smoking a pipe nor not smoking a pipe matter, but only faith working through love."

Is this an antinomian (literally, against the law or throwing out the law) gospel that I am preaching? NO. Breaking God's law is not faith working. Real freedom doesn't indulge sinful desires, because that's just more slavery. Real freedom goes after the Real Lover. The key is walking in the freedom Christ has given you. You don't have to build a record of righteousness, you already have one!

One of my biggest struggles is with criticizing other churches and many of the silly movements in evangelicalism (I've probably done it in this sermon already.) What's really behind it? I want people to see how smart I am, and how I have it together, get people on my side, tithing towards our church and our programs. Pastors (especially church planters) are terrible in often shunning people who leave our churches. Let me give you freedom right now- if you want to leave Grace, you can do and I will still love

you. I'll probably encourage you to stay on the way out (especially if you commit to this covenant community through our upcoming membership classes), and it'll be hard if I see you at Panera, because I'm insecure. But you are not bound in any way except by the Lord's love. That frees both of us. You can do church because you want to and I can pastor without fear of upsetting you!

We Can Obey With Joy

Verse 13 says, "For you were called to freedom, brother. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." Love must be free, you cannot compel love. Imagine me kissing my wife because the law told me I had to!

You can do this because Love served you. Jesus' freedom secured our salvation. Jesus was not compelled by any law to love us. Jesus didn't defend His character to save His life. Jesus didn't let what others thought of him keep Him from fulfilling what God had given Him to do. It was Jesus' freedom to love us that sent Him to the cross, and there He defeated all of the enemies that try to enslave us- death, our flesh, the devil.

Now, we are called and privileged to love each other freely. The irony here is that you now have the freedom to deny yourself to love others. May our church be a place where we all are freed to pursue our joy in God and the calling and purpose for which He created us!