

Galatians 5:1

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[0 : 00] But for tonight, the plan is to really hear a quite short and a simple message from verse 1 of the chapter that John read from. That's our text for tonight. If you look there, Galatians 5 verse 1.

And I think there are two things for us to think about there.

And Paul says, number one, Christ has set us free for freedom. Christ has set us free for freedom. Now, it seems a little bit cruel, doesn't it, to speak about that word at a time like this?

But regardless of what the prime minister says at seven o'clock tonight, Christians have a freedom that cannot be taken away. Christians have a freedom that remains intact, whatever our circumstances.

I don't know if that's your perception of the Christian life or of Christians themselves. Would you use that word to describe your Christian life?

[1 : 10] If not, it's not actually that surprising because the Christians in Galatia, to whom Paul writes, also struggled with this idea of freedom.

They didn't get it. Notice how Paul phrases verse 1. For freedom, Christ set us free. Sounds really odd, doesn't it? As if he'd free us for any other reason.

It sounds obvious, Paul. But Paul states the obvious because for some of us, it's just not all that obvious. I don't really think that living for Jesus is about living a life of freedom.

Jesus says that I've got to obey him and submit to him and follow his commands. I'm no longer in charge of my life. He is in charge of my life. I am no longer Lord.

He is. Is that freedom? To obey his rules and regulations. To be locked in to Jesus's rule.

[2 : 15] The Galatians were beginning to wonder on it. Actually, they were very good at following rules and regulations. You'll notice in this section that Paul deals with them keeping laws about circumcision.

They were law people. They loved to follow the law, but not in a good way. At heart, they were moralists.

They've got Jesus. They know about Jesus and what he's done to pay for our sins. But they want to add more to what he's done. They want to do a bit themselves to get righteous.

To supplement the work of Christ with religious law keeping. But they've not understood the gospel properly. Christ has set us free for freedom.

And Paul, earlier in the letter, explains what this freedom is all about. Earlier in chapter 2, he says in verse 16 that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus.

[3 : 22] So did you hear what he says there? Jesus brings his people a freedom from works of the law. A freedom to be known and loved and accepted by God.

That's what the word justified means. To know friendship with God apart from our works of the law. That is not a freedom that most people think they need, is it?

It's not a fashionable kind of freedom, like freedom of speech or freedom of movement or freedom of religion. Freedom to do what you want to do. It's a freedom, actually, with greater value than those freedoms.

Because it's not a freedom to be ourselves, but a freedom from ourselves. A freedom from ourselves and the failures that we commit and carry with us.

The failures that we carry before God. It's a freedom from facing the curse of our failure to live up to God's ways, his law in our lives.

[4 : 34] Freedom from works of God's law. Working to make ourselves right in God's sight. Paul says that by trusting in Jesus, we are freed from that.

He says in chapter three that Christ redeemed us. He brought us back from the curse of the law. How? Well, not by God being less holy or having lower standards.

But by becoming a curse for us, he says. And Paul is speaking there about the cross. Paul says that that on the cross is where Jesus brought us this freedom.

He became cursed for us. He took our place. So as we read about the Lord Jesus in the Gospels, in the Bible, we see there a man who takes our place.

Who becomes a curse for us. Who becomes cursed in our stead. He lives perfectly, doesn't he? And he's tempted, but he never sins. Never sins in anger.

[5 : 41] He's tempted with all kinds of things. With the lust and greed and power. But he never succumbs to those things. And he keeps God's law perfectly.

He loves his father with all of his heart and mind and strength. He loves his neighbor as himself. And then he dies the death that his people deserve in our place.

So when we have a bad week, when we sin, when we fail under God's law, when we do things that we shouldn't do and when we don't do things that we should do, Jesus takes our place.

Like we saw this morning, he goes before us when we fail. He takes our place. He takes our place under God's righteous wrath and hatred of our wrongdoing.

So it's a freedom from works which fail. Freedom from the curse that we would inevitably get, from the curse that we deserve.

[6 : 47] And it's a freedom from our own pride. From heading into this week and relying on yourself and your own moral performance. Freedom from your own self-righteousness.

Self-justification. Freedom from self altogether. From yourself. You see, the Galatians, they thought that their obedience would lead to this freedom.

But actually, it's the other way around, isn't it? Jesus gives freedom by taking our place, which leads to obedience. And this is what the Bible calls grace.

God blessing us, not because we're good, but because he is good. And there is a massive difference. For the Galatians, it was about performing this ceremony of circumcision.

It was about their works before God. But Paul says in verse six, In Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything, but only faith working through love.

[7 : 55] So unless Jesus takes your place and frees you and you trust in him, you have faith in him to do that for you. Your works, what you do, count for nothing, Paul says.

Unless Jesus sets you free from the curse that you deserve, your obedience, your good works count for nothing. And actually, the Galatians should have known that from how circumcision was given, because God has always worked in the same way in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

Grace comes first. And they should have known about God's grace. In the Old Testament, circumcision was given as an expression of faith in God's liberation for Abraham and his children. So God, remember, told Abraham in Genesis 17 to be circumcised and to circumcise his sons. But that wasn't so that God would then free them, is it?

It was an expression. It was a sign of a freedom already given by God in God's salvation that came earlier. So earlier in Genesis 12, God told Abraham that he would bless Abraham and make of him a great nation and give him a land so that he would be a blessing.

[9 : 22] And that came out of the blue. God revealed himself to Abraham. God wasn't responding to Abraham's goodness or his performance. But Abraham was called to respond to God's goodness.

And we're told that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. He was in God's right in God's sight because he believed, because he had faith in God's grace.

That's before he did anything. And then God gave him circumcision as a mark of that faith. But what happened over time was that those two things got switched around.

And rather than helping Abraham's offspring later in generations trust in God's freedom for them, circumcision had become the thing that was trusted in by God's people, the thing that was done to perform, to win freedom.

And so our obedience can end up trying to pull God along behind us when actually it is God pulling us along in his goodness. But Christ comes then, doesn't he, to reorder things.

[10 : 37] He comes to bring freedom from thinking like that. For freedom, he has set us free from works of the law. So secondly, Paul says, don't submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Christ has set us free for freedom. So verse one, stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Stand in your freedom as a believer in Christ.

Hold on to it. Live it. Don't become a slave again. Now, again, we ask the question, why on earth does Paul put it like that?

Why does he need to say that? You know, if you let someone out of prison, do you need to hold them back from trying to get back in again? Are they desperate to get back into the cells?

Well, actually, in reality, sometimes, yes, it's true. They are. You see, the human heart and mind is like the heart and mind of a kind of institutionalized prisoner.

[11 : 48] Who's been inside for a long, long time and who on release day can't seem to cope with the outside world. They can't cope with freedom. So they reoffend to get back into prison.

It's really odd, isn't it? But it happens because life seems better on the inside than being let out. And we're like that, aren't we? We're so tuned to being slaves to our own pride and our own performance that we just don't get it when God frees us from those things.

And the history of God's people shows that. Remember, God's first big rescue mission was to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt.

What is the first thing that God's people do when they're released? They want to go back. This freedom that Jesus gives us is something in a sense that we long for and we want.

And it sounds good. Freedom from works of the law. And yet something in us makes us go back.

We want to submit again to a yoke of slavery, to the shackles of our performance, of our works of the law.

[13 : 11] Now, I think it's pretty safe to say that not many of us tonight attempted to start getting into circumcision, are we? Don't think that's an issue for most of us. You'd have thought then that this letter to the Galatians has become a bit out of touch.

We're not struggling with this, are we? But Paul hints at what lies at the heart of their problem, which actually is a temptation we all face and share in every age.

Because earlier in the letter, he talks about something called the elementary principles of the world.

You see that phrase a couple of times in chapter four, the elementary principles of the world.

It's describing the basic principles, the basic values of the world that we live in, in every age. A world trying to deal with the human condition, trying to deal with human failure and sin underneath God.

And that is because all of us are created as moral creatures. We're created with consciences. We're made to tell the difference between right and wrong.

[14 : 27] And our consciences communicate to us that we've fallen short of God's glory. We know that when we lash out at our kids, we've done wrong.

When we envy someone and their things and that consumes us, we're doing wrong. Or when we become overanxious and we're untrusting of God's goodness, we've done wrong.

And when we're proud and so on, every day we're reminded that we fall short. I think just as an aside, this lockdown situation makes us face our failures in a much more raw way, doesn't it?

There are less distractions. We're facing our sinfulness in a much more stark way. And yet, strangely, if I don't know this freedom that Jesus gives me, the values of the world, the elementary principles of the world keep telling me that I can do this.

We are so easily seduced into believing that we actually can gain all the approval we need from God just by our behaviour.

[15 : 37] You see, the world's problem isn't that there is no morality in the world. It's not that we've become empty of all moral judgments. At the moment, that's really, really clear, actually.

If you look at how people are behaving, there is a strong sense of morality in this country. As we praise the sacrifice and service of NHS staff or World War II heroes, they're lauded rightly, aren't they?

And we frown at flouters in the park. People have a keen sense of morality at the moment. But the problem here is not morality.

It is moralism. Moralism is when we take our morality and we make it our God. We take our moral performance and we make it our saviour.

And we can even do that with God's morals and laws. They're good things. And yet we can make them our saviours. Yes, it's possible. You can use God's laws actually to push God and his grace away from you.

[16 : 47] It's what the Galatians were doing. It's quite clever the way that Paul speaks in this passage, because as they were circumcising themselves, Paul, in a backhanded comment, uses a

lot of cutting language in the passage.

In verse four, look at what he says. By trusting in circumcision, they were severing themselves away from Christ. Cutting themselves away from God.

Cutting themselves away from grace. Do you see what they were doing? They were using God's laws to cut God out. Literally in this case.

And that is what moralism is. It is a deadly mixture of morality mixed with pride and self-righteousness. And it is so addictive.

Because it puts myself back in control. Jesus comes to take our place. And we are tempted to say, it's OK, Jesus.

[17 : 52] Jesus, I can face this and deal with my own sins before God by myself. Thank you very much. And of course, the mistake there is to think that our sins aren't so bad.

And that our good works are so good. And that I'm good enough. So I can do it myself. But that is a lie. But we're just so used to believing it.

Jesus sets us free for freedom. But that freedom means letting him do it. Letting him be Lord. Letting him take my place in earning righteousness before God. And that is upside down thinking, isn't it? If you submit to Christ as Lord and you become his slave, as he becomes your master, he sets you free from that lie.

But when you free yourself from him and his work, you become a slave to that lie. And it's misery again. You become a slave to yourself again.

[19 : 01] You'll have probably heard this story before. But the story goes of an Afro-Caribbean guy called Ludger Silbaris. And Silbaris became famous because he was one of the only two men who survived a massive volcano eruption in the town of St. Pierre on an island in the Caribbean.

It happened in 1902. And the volcano eruption was so severe that it killed about 40,000 people on the island. But Silbaris, this guy, survived it.

But the thing about his story was how he survived it. Because he and another guy were the only two men at the time in St. Pierre's underground prison.

And as the volcano erupted, they were locked up in the dungeons beneath the island. They were slaves. But what they thought was their prison ended up freeing them.

The prison protected them as the free men and women on the surface were killed. You see, it was a slavery that brought them freedom and life.

[20 : 19] And it's kind of what we've seen, haven't we, about belonging to the Lord Jesus. That being his slave, when he is Lord, frees us.

That as he calls to us to obey him and serve him and follow his law, he calls us to do that, not to earn freedom, but in response to the freedom that he's already given by taking our place.

And that is grace, isn't it? And that drives us to live godly lives. That's what Paul says in Titus, remember when we looked at it as a church a while ago.

For the grace of God has appeared, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions.

When he takes our place as our saviour, we begin to enjoy this freedom and actually serve him in it all the more.

He frees us from the perfect demands of God's law so that we can enjoy the delights of God's law.

[21 : 29] Martin Luther said that the gospel supplies the world with the salvation of Jesus Christ, peace of conscience and every blessing.

And just for that, the world hates the gospel. Why does it do that? Why does the world hate the good news of Jesus taking our place?

Because the world with its elementary principles would make moralists of us all. We value every freedom available apart from the freedom not to earn our own salvation.

The values of the world want all the freedoms of liberal society. But sees no value in the freedom that Jesus gives. Not freedom to be ourselves, but a freedom from ourselves.

Because we're so tempted to make the self king. Paul isn't saying at all that God doesn't care whether we obey him or not. That's not what grace is about.

[22 : 39] He is pleased when we obey him and we follow his law and displeased when we sin against him. But this is the yoke of which Paul speaks of that wants to make your behaviour the measure of your value and meaning and worth before God and your acceptance before him.

That if you perform well this week, you'll have had a good week. But if you don't, you'll have some more work to do next week to get back into God's good books. But that's not the gospel.

That's not the freedom that Jesus brings. Augustine said of this strange relationship that we have with Jesus as he is Lord over us, he frees us.

He says, any other burden oppresses and crushes you. But Christ's burden actually takes weight off you. Any other burden weighs you down.

But Christ's burden gives you wings. He uses the analogy of a bird. If you take a bird's wings away, you might seem to be taking weight away from it.

[23 : 48] But the more weight you take off, the more you tie it down to the earth. There it is on the ground and you wanted to relieve it of weight.

But give it back the weight of its wings and you will see how it flies. It's a slavery that frees. Jesus says to us, doesn't he?

Let me burden you down with my lordship this evening. Come under my yoke. Be my slave. Be my servant.

And as you come under me, feel the weight lifting off you. Feel the weight of guilt and misery lifting off you.

Because I took your place. For freedom Christ has set us free. So stand firm, therefore. And do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

[24 : 53] Let's pray together. Let's pray together.