

For Freedom - Christ has set us Free! Galatians 5:1-15

In our reading this morning we have heard a spirited and strong call for 'freedom. Does this cry remind you of Braveheart? But it is not Mel Gibson calling the Scottish to rise up and be free from the English but the apostle Paul who is calling the Galatians to be freed from the cancer of legalism, so that they might be free to love in the vital form of servanthood. You can see and read between the lines the sense of urgency in Paul's voice. He uses every rhetorical weapon in his arsenal to make his case. You can almost imagine Paul pushing down so hard on his pen, nearly to breaking point, as he's writing these words. "Stand firm", he says. "Mark my words," he declares. "I, Paul, tell you," he reminds them. "Again I declare to every man," he restates. "Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?" he asks. And lastly to his enemies, to those in the opposition party he growls, "I wish they would castrate themselves."

I've read all of Paul's New Testament letters numerous times, but never have I seen him so intense, so upset about anything. Only Paul could get away with calling for the castration of his enemies in one verse, and two verses later call for his friends to love their neighbours. Well, you know the saying, 'no one is perfect'. Not me, not you. Not even Paul. He did get carried away here and said probably something he shouldn't have. But that should draw our attention to the heart of his argument instead of the violence of his language. He is calling, pleading, begging for the Galatians to embrace freedom in Christ and oppose the legalism of religion. "For freedom Christ has set us free". The idea of freedom is so important it almost sounds redundant: "Christ sets us free... so that we can be free." Why does Paul put things this way? Why not simply say, "Christ has set us free?" Why the emphasis – "for freedom Christ has set us free"?

I believe Paul is simply making a big deal about freedom. If we are not free in our embrace of the Christian faith, it is not genuine faith glorifying God in our worship and life. We are not robots playing a role in a meaningless drama. We have been freely created by a free God, who freely calls us to faith in Jesus Christ, and he awaits our free response. Freedom is integral to human existence and the Christian faith.

And yet freedom has been hijacked by literary terrorists. The word has been abused and mistreated so that it is in need of major rehabilitation. For one thing, freedom has become understood to mean ***“the freedom to do whatever you want to do.”***

Teenagers want to break away from the rules their parents have set. “I can’t wait to be free from their rules” they say. Drivers want to be free to drive at any speed they want to drive. “As long as I don’t hurt anybody, what’s the big deal”. People want moral freedom to create their own individual code of conduct completely divorced from thousands of years of Godly and state standards.

Now it is, “I’ll do what I want and you do what you want.”

That’s how many people consider the ideal of freedom.

So let’s see what Paul has to say about freedom in Galatians 5.

How does he use the word? I will cover three truths about freedom.

I. Freedom is grounded in Christ (5:1)

First, Paul asserts that our freedom is grounded in the life and work and person of Jesus Christ. Christ has set us free Paul declares. This is not something we have done as Christians. It is only something we have received as Christians. Freedom is grounded in truth. John records in his gospel the words of Jesus, “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). The truth is that Jesus was God’s only begotten Son. He came into the world to reveal the perfect love of God for humankind. He died for a broken world in atonement for its sin. And all who believe in him, will not perish but have everlasting life.

Paul follows this assertion of freedom in Christ with a negative assertion. Freedom does not come from the law, and it certainly doesn’t come from circumcision. As we have already learned there were Christians in the Galatians community who were trying to make circumcision a prerequisite for salvation. They were demanding that Gentiles become Jews before they could become Christians. But Paul rightly saw that pathway led to futility. No one could obey the whole law. All the law did was point out our sin; it didn’t free us from sin. The stain of human sin was so deep, only a radical cleaning could undo it. Only the blood of Jesus Christ could wash away our sin and bring us true, everlasting freedom. Only faith in Jesus Christ can set us free.

A word that could be rightly used to describe the circumcision party of 1st Century Galatia is legalism. **Legalism is the tendency to add more and more requirements to simple faith in Jesus Christ.**

I cannot believe that Jesus Christ would have brought a life-changing faith to the poor in spirit, and even the children of Israel if it was to be so burdened with extra complications. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is simple enough for an illiterate person or an innocent child to embrace. And so today, we should share the simple Gospel with everyone and let them freely accept or reject it. If you accept the truth of the good news about Jesus, it will set you free, . Free from the bondage of sin and self, free from the bondage of trying to please God with your goodness and piety, free from the tyranny of religious legalists who want to control your. .Freedom is grounded in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone! We also need to understand . . .

II. Freedom is constantly under threat.

Listen to what Paul says in verses 7-8 *"You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you."*

Paul is saying, "You're listening to the wrong people. You're allowing yourself to be influenced by the wrong crowd."

A group of Jewish Christians, who believed that you have to keep the Jewish religious laws in order to be saved, had come into the church in Galatia and had begun spreading their influence around—and many of the Galatian Christians were being led astray. Even the Apostle Peter was led astray. Paul was furious that this group of people had begun stirring up trouble, trying to turn people away from the idea of salvation by faith alone in Jesus Christ, and turn them toward the idea of salvation through obedience to the law. Have you ever been really mad because someone was trying to create a barrier between someone and Christ? Have you ever encountered someone who was adding on so many requirements to the faith it was driving people into a state of spiritual despair?

The likes of Jehovah's witnesses, the Mormons, and some legalistic churches have perverting the Gospel and lead astray sincere seekers of God, people who are willing to bow down to the, teaching and direction of elders and leaders of these cults, while being sold short as individuals genuinely who want to please God.

No wonder Paul said, **"I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!"**

That word translated "emasculate" means literally "cut themselves off" and it refers to castration! Paul is using a play on words. He's literally calling for castration, and maybe he's serious about that. He sounds serious to me. But he's also saying he wants this party cut off from the church. They are trouble. They are a cancer. This is not about a minor doctrinal difference. It's about the foundation of your spiritual life: Are trying to earn your salvation through obedience to the law—in which case you are headed for a lifetime of misery and failure; or are you receiving salvation as a gift of God's grace—in which case you can experience a lifetime of freedom and victory. It's an important issue, and Paul didn't take kindly to the members of a legalistic faction coming in and destroying people's freedom in Christ. Who do you listen to? I think we all have at least one person in our lives who is "the voice of the law"—the voice of non-grace—who tells us "You've got to prove yourself over and over again. You've got to earn any respect or any kindness you get from me. You've got to measure up to my standard." Maybe it's the voice of a parent, or a boss, or a spouse, or one of our "friends"—but often times we project that voice onto God. We hear him saying those things to us: "Prove it. Earn it. Work for it. And by the way, I'm still not satisfied."

This is the voice of the legalist; it is not the voice of God. It is the voice of self-righteousness, not the voice of mercy. If you want to learn to walk in the freedom of the Spirit, then, whenever that person speaks to you, turn on the filter and tune them out. Instead, make it a habit to listen to the voices of grace in your life. Listen to those who speak strength into your life, who speak encouragement into your life, who speak comfort into your life. Listen to those who inspire you to become like Jesus, who ignite in you a passion for holiness, and who remind you always of the goodness of God's grace. That's who you want to listen to, because they will help you learn to walk in the Spirit. As for all the self-righteous, legalistic hypocrites—let their words fall on deaf ears. They are a threat to your freedom in Christ.

III. Freedom makes love possible. Vv13-15

Freedom is grounded in Jesus Christ. It is no opportunity for legalism. And finally, Paul asserts that freedom makes love possible. Paul ends v.13 with an alternative to legalism. **It is serving one another in love.** That's how freedom is demonstrated. That's the fruit of freedom. Freedom is not lived through memorising laws and carrying

out religious rituals to perfection. It culminates in serving one another in love. Freedom that does not move toward service toward others in a spirit of love is nothing more than license for self. God is love. And God demonstrated his love for the world by coming to the earth in the form of a servant, through one who stooped down to wash the feet of others, one who touched the lepers at the risk of contracting leprosy, one who hung out with demonic women at the risk of being discredited in the eyes of the powerful male elite. Jesus welcomed the children when his disciples wanted him to deal with other more important figures in the community. He was on his knees drawing in the dirt in the presence of an adulteress, when the religious leaders wanted him to join in stoning her. He endured the wrath and ridicule of the government on his way to the cross, when he could have easily called down a legion of angels to wipe them off the face of the earth, and established himself on the throne. He walked when he could have been carried. He cried when he encountered death. He suffered with those who suffer, rather than isolating himself in a gated community, and planning for himself a life of ease.

And that's what Christian freedom is to lead to in our lives. If we bite and devour one another we reveal we are still enslaved to our sin and do not know what true freedom is.

Love manifest in service to others is our call as Christians. Yes, we can unequivocally call all people to faith in Jesus Christ without being arrogant about it. We're not calling people to follow us, but to follow Jesus. Yes, we can absolutely lift up the standard of a moral life without a spirit of anger or self-righteousness. Freedom in Christ means freedom from self-indulgence and freedom for life grounded in the commandments of God. But most of all, our freedom in Christ means we are freed for love. We are called to help one another, serve one another, give ourselves to one another. In short, the irony and paradox of Christian freedom is that it leads us to become slaves for Christ in service to one another. That, my friends, is what freedom is all about. So let freedom ring from the hearts of the believers at DPC. Let freedom ring as we serve one another in Christian love.

Let's Pray...