

Stand Firm in Your Freedom

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 (NIV)

¹ 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. ¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." (verse 1) It's a bold statement by the Apostle Paul, but what does it mean? What have we been set free from?

In context of this letter to the Christians in the area of Galatia (modern Turkey), Paul is reinforcing to them that they are free from slavery to God's law. It was a shift in their thinking. They had thought that a right relationship to the law was based on how well they kept his commands, that they were bound as if in chains to doing these things if they were ever to be right with God. Now they are seeing that everything was accomplished with Jesus' life and works. Jesus had come and had lived perfectly under the law of God in our place. Having completed it as he shouted "It is finished" on the cross on Good Friday, all the Old Testament laws that had foreshadowed him were now fulfilled, completed. His resurrection from the dead was God's declaration that Jesus' perfect life lived in our place was accepted by him, that no more payment of slavishly keeping laws would be taken or could be given.

Some people, though, were still convinced that for us to get close to God, to be with God, we had to continue to do the checklist of God's law. They taught that males had to be circumcised if God was going to save them and take them to heaven. They chained themselves to what they did for God rather than on what God did for them.

Paul was writing this letter to make sure that the Galatians, as well as us, would be reassured that Christ really did already fulfill the law. It really was completed. God gifts Jesus' perfect life and all his works to us through his gift of faith. This gift of faith is given to us and reinforced in us by the Holy Spirit when we gather around his Word and hear it. It was given to us when it was spoken in connection with water in baptism to wash away our sins, clothe us with Christ's perfection, and adopt us into God's family. It is given to us as God's Word is connected with bread and wine, his body and blood given for us in the Lord's Supper.

Because we have this, you and I are no longer slaves to the law, chained to it. There is not a divine checklist that you need to do in order to earn God's favor, to work your way into his presence, to get into heaven based on your best efforts. Before you were brought to faith, you couldn't help but sin. But since God has come to you, since God has brought you to faith in him and what he has done for you, you are a new creation. Now you can say no to chaining yourself to God's commands, trying to earn a right standing with God. You can say no to sin because you are free! Stand firm in that freedom that Christ has won for you, given to you.

But, as often happens in life, when you avoid one sin – such as the sin of becoming a slave to God's law to earn your place with him – you can swing too far the other way and become a different kind of slave. For the Galatian Christians, some of them had swung the other way and had decided that they could do whatever they wanted, indulge in whatever sin they fancied, all because they were set free from God's law since Christ had completed it. They served themselves and not their fellow Christians. They gratified what their sinful natures wanted. In this way, they had burdened themselves again by a yoke of slavery, this time as slaves to themselves.

Have we swung in the same direction? Do we take the freedom that Christ won for us and use it as a license to sin, a license to be selfish? Recently, how has the word "freedom" been used by you? By others? Is freedom brought up as something that ensures I get what I want? Is it a word used to justify not listening to other people and their viewpoints, that you don't have to challenge your way of thinking because you are free? Is it used so that you don't have to make any changes in your life? Is freedom a one word way of saying, "You can't tell me what to do"?

If this is the “freedom” that we think Christ has given us, we have put back on a yoke of slavery, chained to serving ourselves. By making selfish decisions, we make ourselves the highest priority in life. We make ourselves “gods.”

When Christ set us free from the law, that didn’t mean that the Christian is to reject it and abandon it wholesale. No, what happens is that the purpose of the law changes. Before we were brought to faith in Christ and set free from the slavery of the law, the law was an endless checklist to perfection, one, that try as hard as we could, we could never fulfill. It made us conscious of our sins and taught us that we need someone to swoop in and save us from ourselves, to break the chains of endlessly trying to complete God’s law but failing miserably.

Since Christ has come and has completed the law and we are fully forgiven and made completely perfect by what he has done in our place, the law takes on a different purpose in our live. “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (verses 13-14) God’s law is not jettisoned in the freedom that Christ has won for us since he has completed it, but instead it is now used as a guide for our lives, a guide for the use of our freedom.

When Paul tells the Galatian Christians and us to stand firm in our freedom, he’s telling us to stand firmly in the fact that our sins are completely paid for, taken away, no repayment is accepted, that we are completely perfect before him AND that we can use our freed lives in humbly service to others. Christ did not set us free so that we would become slaves to selfishness, to use freedom as a license to sin, but that we are free to serve one another because we walk by the Holy Spirit, the one who came and made a home with us in our hearts when we heard how Christ set us free from the law.

Freedom to the Christian is freedom to serve others. This is where many people go wrong when it comes to the Christian faith. They say that it’s too easy that God has accomplished everything for us. They say that if you are perfect and complete now, that you don’t have to do something for it, then everyone would just indulge in selfish sins all the time. This is why they make checklists and ordinances and commands as the things that will bring you closer to God. But checklists and ordinances and commands will only make you a slave to the law once again. You have been set free from that. Stand firm in that freedom.

Opportunities abound to use our freedom to humbly serve others in love. Because the Holy Spirit has come to you, he bears in you “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.” (verses 22-23) These fruits of the Spirit are not another checklist, though, as if you can show to God your punch card for each of the fruits of the Spirit that you used on someone else, making yourself a slave once again to what you do to try to be close to god. You are already complete. You have nothing to prove to God, but you do have the opportunity to use your freedom to shower these fruits on other people.

To whom will you show love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Maybe this is to perfect strangers in the grocery store, to your fellow employees, to your next-door neighbors, to your extended family, to the people in your house, the people you’re around all the time. God guides you to use your freedom to serve them with the fruits the Holy Spirit produces in you.

Christ has set us free from slavery to the law. You are forgiven. You’re covered in Christ’s perfection. You are complete. You are free. Stand firm in this freedom to serve other. Amen.