

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
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Galatians 5:1-13a “The Life of Freedom”

Intro. Have you ever had a habit you could not break? Have you ever been addicted to a sinful behavior? Have you ever been involved in a religion that seemed to bind you, and enslave you? The fact is some form of bondage is the all too common experience of humanity. Imagine what it would be like to be a prostitute, working under the control of a pimp. Imagine yielding to sin to the point of loosing your freedom by ending up in jail. Imagine living in a country ruled by a godless dictator, where the whole country is in bondage to fear.

Bondage and enslavement is a characteristic of our fallen, sinful world. So this morning I want to talk to you about the freedom we can have through Jesus Christ. This weekend we remember those who died to give us political freedom. Jesus died to give us an even broader kind of freedom. But I'm afraid that we Christians have been too influenced by the *modern* American view of freedom, rather than the biblical notion of freedom. Our founding fathers, such as Benjamin Franklin, spoke of freedom as the right to do what is right. But today, men, women, and even children are demanding freedom to do as they please. They want independence, autonomy, and personal sovereignty. In our country, all kinds of sin is being committed in the name of liberty, and the ACLU is ready to defend that kind of freedom. But this morning I want to challenge you to gain an understanding of the biblical view of freedom, to stand fast in this freedom, and avoid all forms of bondage that threaten your freedom.

So first of all, I ask you to:

I. RECOGNIZE GOD'S CALL TO LIBERTY

If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you need to understand the fact that God has called you to liberty. This is clearly stated in v.13, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty....” The call to freedom is the essence of his message to the Galatians. And Paul says emphatically that God's stated purpose for redemption was for freedom of the believer. Freedom is at the very heart of the gospel. Jesus said, “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Then He said, “if therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:32, 36).

But what kind of freedom does Paul have in mind? Notice the word “therefore” in v.1. That points back to the previous context. There in 4:21-31, Paul argues that “being free” is first of all based on a relationship with God. Whereas by natural birth we are born into bondage as Ishmael was, even so by spiritual birth we become God's free children, as Isaac was born of the free woman. In the first part of chapter 4 Paul argues that we enjoy the status of adult sons. We no longer have to live under the tutelage of a supervisor (4:1-7), such as legalistic regulations. So based on a faith relationship with Jesus Christ, we *are* free. That is who we are in Christ.

Now once Christ sets you free, you need to understand that you are set free *from* something, and set free *to* something. So the second aspect of freedom is we are set free *from* the penalty and power of sin. Freedom from the penalty of sin is tied into the language of “redemption.” Do you remember the imagery of the sinner on the auction block as a slave of sin, and Christ paid the redemption price to set you free? Gal. 3:13 says that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law

by His own death. We are no longer condemned by our sin. Furthermore, we are set free from the enslaving power of sin. Rom. 8:2 says, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death” (cf. Rom. 6:7, 18, 22). Gal. 1:4 is Paul’s first comment about freedom in our letter: “who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.” The sinner is enslaved by an evil world system, including the reality of peer pressure that pushes many further into sin. Christian freedom has crushed all enslavement to sin, and to the power of an evil world.

Third, people are set free *to* serve and obey God. The person who is truly free no longer acts from constraint but serves his God willingly. By nature the human will is bound by sin, but through the new birth, we are given a new desire to serve God. Yet, a desire to live right is not enough. You also need the know-how and the power to live the way the Lord wants you to. Jesus said the truth shall set you free. God’s Word will give you the know-how. And the power to live right comes from the Holy Spirit. 2 Cor. 3:17 says, “...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” Thus, the believer is liberated to be what God wants us to be, and to do what God wants us to do.

Yet, the believer is not free from all restraint. We have the guidance and restraint of the Word of God, an active conscience, and the Spirit of God. Illustration: Liberty is not looseness. A kite that is released from its string gets its looseness, but loses its liberty to be a kite. Likewise, a “free” balloon is the captive of every passing breeze. Jesus said that we discover real living not by wandering all over the map, but on the definite, narrow way.¹ A train is free to be what a train was designed to do as long as it stays on the tracks. But as soon as it derails, it is ruined.

How then do we apply this? First, people must see that they need to be free. No one becomes “biblically free” until one accepts that he or she is enslaved to sin, self, and the world. We cannot proclaim our message of freedom until we proclaim the reality of sin. That is the problem in America today. We have removed the concept of sin. They say that homosexuality is not a sin; it is just an alternate lifestyle. I could give many other examples. Another application is given in v.1, and that is my second main point:

II. REMAIN STEADFAST IN LIBERTY

Explanation: It’s one thing to gain your freedom by faith in Christ, and understand it. It’s altogether something else to remain free. So Paul says in v.1, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free....” This is a command. Once we have been set free by Christ, it is our duty to live free, and remain free. We are to stand fast, and not give an inch to anything or anyone who would take away our freedom in Christ. 1 Cor. 6:12 says, “...All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.” Remember, Christ died on the cross in order to set us free. How could we do anything to give up the freedom that He paid such a high price to provide?

You see, not all Christians enjoy their freedom. That is because they do not understand it, or because they do not stand fast in their freedom, and hold on to it.

Paul tells us one important aspect of standing fast in our freedom. Notice he says in the last part of v.1, “...and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” “Entangled” (*enecho*) literally means, “to be held in.” I remember as a kid being put in a headlock by my big brother and others who picked on me. The other word that Paul uses to convey the idea of bondage is the word “yoke.” A yoke was used to get certain animals to work together. The image of the yoke is not difficult to understand. The farmer uses the yoke to control and guide his oxen, because they would

¹ George E. Sweazey, *Preaching the Good News* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 71 [Illus. #C-682].

not willingly serve if they were free. Thus a yoke was symbolic of hard, forced labor and control by someone else over your life. Peter had spoken of the law as being a yoke that no one could bear (Acts 15:10). It usually represents slavery and service. Note that Paul warned against being entangled “again.” The Galatians had formerly been ensnared by heathenism and were in slavery to its customs and practices. Now they were becoming entangled all over again in the meshes of legalistic Judaism. They were like an animal loosed from pulling a plow, only to be hooked up again. Surely, Christ set us free in order that we might indeed become free and remain free!

Application: I believe one reason we loose our freedom is when we lack discernment concerning those things that take away our freedom in Christ. And so that leads to my last point. If we are going to remain steadfast in freedom, we must also:

III. REJECT ANY FORM OF BONDAGE

I believe there are several forms of bondage that Paul warns about in this text of Scripture. We should reject these, and all other forms of bondage that keeps you from being free to serve God, and love others.

A. Reject the Bondage of Legalism – This can be defined as human effort at keeping religious law as a *means* of salvation, or as a means of pleasing God. This is especially true of law and rules that deal with outward righteousness, but not with the heart. Trying to be saved by keeping Jewish Law is frustrating, oppressive, and only condemns because such law is impossible to keep. The worst form of legalism is adherence to man-made rules that are not even clearly given in Scripture.

Beginning in v.2 Paul now applies his thesis of the Christian being a truly free person to the issue of circumcision, the primary Jewish legal requirement facing the Galatians. Notice that he begins v.2 saying, “Indeed I, Paul, say to you² that if you become circumcised...” The basic doctrinal error of the Judaizers was works righteousness, the same error that is the heart of every other man-made religious system. Jews were often referred to simply as the circumcised (Acts 10:45; 11:2; Gal. 2:7), because that was their most distinctive outward mark and the one in which they had the greatest pride and confidence. Paul’s objection here is not to circumcision in itself. Simply being circumcised is not the issue. Rather, it is their reason for circumcision that provokes Paul. Circumcision was in essence a kind of pledge to live by the rule of the law. Paul’s warning about circumcision pertained only to the false idea that in itself it carried spiritual benefit or merit. The Judaizers were saying that faith in Jesus Christ, although important, was not sufficient for complete salvation.

Argumentation: Beginning in the last part of v.2, Paul makes a series of arguments against relying upon circumcision, or any other legal requirement, as a means of salvation or pleasing God. The first consequence is “Christ will profit you nothing.” The atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ cannot benefit a person who trusts in anything else. A supplemented Christ is a supplanted Christ. To trust in human effort is to trust in law, which is totally incompatible with grace. A person becomes acceptable to God only by placing his full trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. This may apply to one who is already a Christian. Adding law to faith in Christ creates paralysis of the spiritual development. You must choose between keeping the Law in your own strength, or obeying Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. So if you trust in the Law, you lose the sanctifying work of Christ on your behalf.

² This emphasizes the apostle's authority and point up the significance and importance of the statement to follow.

Then in v.3 Paul wants you to understand the impossible demands placed upon the one who trusts in obedience to religious law as the means of salvation. He says, “And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised³ that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.” Paul had already said in Gal. 3:10, “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’” James 2:10 says, “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.” Thus, God’s law was not given as a means of salvation, but to show us our sin, and drive us to seek God’s mercy and grace. But evidently the Judaizers had not proposed that the Galatians keep the whole law, and so Paul points out their inconsistency. They do what many sects and denominations do: they emphasize certain laws, such as circumcision, observing the Sabbath & dietary laws, and so forth. But Paul urges them to consider the far-reaching implications of what they were about to do.

Finally, in v.4 he gives two other related consequences to “you who attempt to be justified by law.” He says in so doing “You have become estranged from Christ.” The word “estranged” (*katargeo*) here probably means “to be severed from, separated from” in terms of influence and power. That word can be illustrated by pulling the power plug of an appliance. If you rely on the Law as a means of righteousness, you cut off the flow of power from Christ into your life. This restatement simply contends that those who opt for the law’s system opt out of the Christ system or the grace system. A person cannot live by both law and grace. To attempt to be justified by law is to reject the way of grace. Then he says, “you have fallen from grace.” Paul is not dealing with the security of the believer here. Rather, he is thinking in terms of two different approaches to God: the way of works and the way of grace. If you seek to be justified or sanctified by law, you in effect renounce the way of grace. When a man decides to live in the energy of the flesh, he cuts the supply-line of God's grace. Legalism is a great fall from the high plain of living in God's grace. To live by grace means to depend on God's abundant supply of every need. If you chose the works of the law, you have fallen out of the way of grace. The picture here is not falling from grace into sin but falling from grace into legalism. Law and grace cannot be mixed. As a means to salvation they are totally incompatible and mutually exclusive. Applied to one who was really an unbeliever, the principle of falling from grace has to do with being exposed to the gracious truth of the gospel and then turning one’s back on Christ. They came to the very doorway of grace and then fell away, back into their works religion. Applied to a believer, the principle of falling from grace has to do with a person who genuinely trusts in Christ for salvation but then outwardly reverts to a life of legalism, of living under external rituals, ceremonies, and traditions that he carries out in his own strength. He exchanges life by grace for life back under law.

Friend, you need to understand that legalism is ineffective. No amount of legislation can change man's basic sinful nature. Legalism can only produce outward changes when there is a means of enforcing the laws consistently. Laws and enforcement are necessary for controlling the behavior of non-Christians and immature children, but they do not produce mature Christians!

[I could use vv. 5-6 as rebuttal argumentation]

Application: You have a choice to make. Satan and his way will be destroyed, and only the way of God will remain, forever and ever. Vacillating between the two is unacceptable. So my friend, don't go the way of legalism. It will not help you grow as a Christian; in fact, it will hurt your Christian life. You need to recognize the legalistic approach to salvation or the Christian life, and reject it, or you will end up in religious bondage.

³ “Circumcised” is not a perfect tense, but present. Paul is addressing the person who is contemplating doing so.

B. Reject the Bondage of Sin - As we have seen, the idea of Christian freedom is so easily misinterpreted. Many tend to equate freedom with committing sin. In fact, turning liberty into license is an evil ingrained in sinful human nature. But it is from sin that the gospel saves believers. Whatever Christian freedom is, it is clearly not the right of believers to return to that from which Christ paid with His own life to save them. So Paul goes on to say in v.13, "...only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh..." Explanation: In this context flesh refers to the sinful inclination of fallen mankind. He is not thinking primarily in terms of the body, though the sin nature of man will certainly use the body for sinful purposes. Now the flesh will tend to use "liberty" as an opportunity to sin. The word translated "opportunity" (*aphorme*) was often used to indicate a central base from which all operations of a military campaign originated. The flesh is always looking for an outlet for sin. It seizes upon the word "liberty" and finds an "occasion" or opportunity to sin. The word translated "occasion" can also be translated "springboard" or "pretext." We must never use Christian liberty as an excuse for sin.

Argumentation: I want to convince you that the so-called freedom to sin only leads to a different form of bondage. Jesus made it clear in John 8:34 that sin will enslave you. Paul also indicates in Rom. 6:18 that before we were saved, we were slaves to sin. In a day when many cry for absolute freedom, many of these same people are becoming slaves to addiction, not only to alcohol and drugs but also to sexual passions, pornography, gambling, violence, and many other forms of bondage in which a person eventually becomes powerless to escape. When people choose to persist in a sin, they develop less and less control over it until eventually they forfeit any choice entirely. Fallen man is a slave to his sinful nature, an addict who cannot successfully control his sinful thoughts and actions even when he may want to. And ironically, the more he asserts his self-centered freedom, the more he becomes enslaved to sin.

Illustration: Sin is similar to a thread. One thread around your hand is easy to break. But many strands of thread around your hand become impossible to break in your own strength. The more you sin, the stronger the bond becomes. It's like the old potato chip commercial: You can't eat just one.

Conclusion: Everyone should recognize the human propensity to sin. The question is, "How do we overcome this strong inclination to sin?" The legalists says law, rules, and punishment. The libertarian denies that sin is a spiritual problem. He says morality is relative to each situation, and education in good decision-making skills is the answer. Jesus gives the better answer. His death on the cross dealt a fatal blow to sin. By faith in Him we are forgiven, free from the penalty of sin. We are also free from the power of sin. By the new birth we have a new nature with new desires. By the indwelling Holy Spirit we have a new power to live right. Oh friend, reject the ways of bondage. Choose Christ; trust in Christ, and you will be free indeed!

Sources: W.A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Oliver B. Greene [vv. 7-13], *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1962); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians & Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968); J.B. Lightfoot [vv. 7-13], *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957); John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987); Scot McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentary: Galatians* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Lehman Strauss, *Devotional Studies in Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957); Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon tapes on this text dated 11/18/84 & 11/25/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1975); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Galatians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1944, 1973). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).