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Grasping Freedom
Galatians 5:1-15
February 1st, 2015, Jeff Germo

There is so much in this passage this morning that it is going to be impossible to touch on every detail, but we will dig into the main points and hopefully by the end we will all have a better grasp of what Paul means when he said that, as Christ-followers, we are free. Like we have noted many times over the last few weeks, this concept of freedom in Christ is so misunderstood. Some people are afraid to preach the unadulterated gospel of Jesus that brings freedom because they fear it will lead to licentiousness. If people find out that Christ has freed them from the law they might take that to mean that they can just throw caution to the wind and live like they want satisfying all their human cravings which will lead to a debauched life.

What can happen then is that the gospel is bypassed and, instead, as Paul said, a gospel that is really no gospel at all is preached, full of do's and don't's, filling people with all kinds of shame because they don't measure up to someone else's standard of good instead of God's. That is never the way of Jesus. If you feel like the gospel binds you up it is no longer good news. You have been fed a lie and swallowed it hook, line and sinker. When you believe the true gospel it will make you breathe a sigh of relief and fall in love with Jesus, so much so that you will want to live in obedience to him.

Let's read this passage and then walk through it and see if we can grasp the freedom Paul is talking about.

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Galatians 5:1–15 (ESV)

¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

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⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. ⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

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⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

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¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Let's take it from the top.

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¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

We could spend the whole morning on this one verse. It is so packed with truth. This is actually, in my humble opinion, the central verse in all of Galatians and perhaps the entire Bible.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Paul uses two forms of the same word here to describe the essence of the Gospel and God's motivation in bringing about our redemption. If you want to find out someone's motivation for doing something, what question do you ask? You ask, 'Why?' 'Why did you do that?' 'I did it because...'

Why did Christ set us free? So we could be free. It's that simple. He didn't free us so that we could walk in slavery to the law or to live lives of debauchery. He freed us from bondage to the law so we could live in freedom. Why?

Because love is not possible without freedom. That is the very reason God has given us free choice. In God's sovereignty he has given us the ability to choose right or wrong so we could freely love him back.

The entire Bible, from front to back, is an epic love story, a rescue mission of epic proportions. The God who created the heavens and the earth sets out to rescue his people from bondage to sin and slavery to the law. God became man. He left his heavenly throne, came to earth, lived the perfect life, and then traded his life for ours. Why did he do it? So we could be free. What do we need to do to be free? Simply receive the gift by faith. We place the full weight of our trust on Jesus. That's it.

Now, when we say that, some will say, "But then don't you have to do this or that? It can't be that easy can it? If we say it like that isn't there risk that some will choose to live in sin?" Perhaps. But, what's the alternative? A false gospel which is not gospel at all. We cannot rescue ourselves. We need a saviour. And the Bible tells us that there is only one saviour, Jesus Christ and him crucified. We do not have what it takes to be our own saviour.

Have you ever given someone a gift and had them feel uncomfortable, like they now needed to pay you back? Or someone gives *you* a gift and *you* feel an uncomfortable obligation to somehow reciprocate? In Japan this is a common occurrence. They have a custom of gift giving that can be difficult to navigate for foreigners and even for Japanese nationals. They have a name for it. They call it 'giri' gifts. We experienced this when we lived in Japan many years ago. It could be quite stressful. The Japanese are great gift givers. Nobody gives gifts better than the Japanese. But, it could easily turn into a trap that is hard to extricate yourself from.

If someone gives you a gift, you are obligated to return the favour. But, the gift has to be the right kind of gift. If you are given a bag of six oranges and you reciprocate with a bag of a dozen oranges you have just insulted them. And not only have you insulted them, but they are now further obligated to give you a bigger gift. You would likewise insult them if you gave them only four oranges. The Japanese are very gracious people with foreigners, so they didn't expect us to get it right all the time, but for the Japanese locals it could be quite stressful to always have this impending sense of obligation wondering if you have done enough.

Paul says, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. There is no obligation that binds us up so that we have to wonder if we have done enough. We do not pay God back for what he has done for us. I sometimes hear people say that they want to tithe or serve to pay God back for what he has done for them. That is the wrong way of looking at it. God has given us a free gift. Free! No strings attached.

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Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

We've been saved by grace through faith. It's a gift, and by very definition a gift is not to be paid back. It is a gift — totally and unequivocally free. That sense of wondering if we have done enough is eliminated. Jesus did it all. We simply receive with open hands and say, "Thank you."

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¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

...stand firm therefore... This is actually a military term. Stand against. It's not a passive word. It is very active. The Judaizers were trying to guilt the new Gentile believers into adding the law to their faith. Paul told them to actively oppose them. Do not give in.

and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Notice that Paul tells them to "**not submit 'again' to a yoke of slavery.**" We've talked about this previously. These were Gentile new believers. Before they received Christ they were pagans. They were idol worshipers. They weren't living by the Mosaic law, but Paul says that slavery to the law is no better than slavery to worshipping idols. Neither way gets you closer to God. Moral goodness does not merit God's favour any more than worshipping an idol. Both are slavery.

The first church was completely Jewish until Peter in Acts 10 had his vision where God spoke to him and very clearly told him that his grace was available to the Gentiles and not just the Jews. This revelation threw the early church into confusion because they didn't know what to do with all the new Gentile converts. Some of the Jewish Christian leaders said the new converts must be circumcised and live according to the Mosaic law. So in Acts 15 the leaders got together in what we call the Council of Jerusalem to debate the matter. Peter stood up in the middle of the meeting and spoke.

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Acts 15:10–11 (ESV)

¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

This was the same group who was telling the new believers in Galatia that they had to follow the Mosaic law if they were going to be saved. Peter admitted that that yoke was impossible for them to bear and it was impossible for their forefathers, so why in the world would we want to chain the law around new believers. The law is a brutal taskmaster. It brings shame, condemnation, and a sense of hopelessness. Paul said, "Don't give in to those who are trying to place the yoke of slavery on you." Stand firm. Do not give in.

How different is that kind of yoke than the yoke Jesus encourages us to take on? Listen to the difference.

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Matthew 11:28–30 (ESV)

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Doesn't this invitation of Jesus sound liberating? He says, are you tired of living under the heavy yoke of bondage to the law? It's an impossible burden. Are you tired of that kind of life, never knowing if you measure up? Always under constant scrutiny of overly religious people who continually judge you? Jesus said if you are tired of that kind of treadmill come to him. He will give you rest from all of that. Learn from him. He is gentle and lowly (humble) in heart. Take his yoke on you and you will find rest for your souls. His yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Do you long for that? If you do, you need to breathe a sigh of relief and give up. It is for freedom Christ has set you free. You can stop trying to prove yourself.

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There is nothing you can do that will make God love you any more. He just loves you. There is nothing you can do to make him love you any less. He will never remove his love from you. Nothing will separate you from his love.

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² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

In the Old Testament, male circumcision was a sign of identification with the people of Israel, God's chosen people to bring hope to the world. Why God would choose such a sign is beyond me, but he did. If you were not circumcised, you and your family were not a part of God's family. Circumcision was a fundamental religious practice and was not compromised.

Paul says here that since Christ came, circumcision and the entire Mosaic law has been satisfied by Christ. And as a matter of fact, if you seek to be justified by accepting circumcision as the way to make you right with God you nullify the work of Christ. That's what Paul said. And if you negate Christ's work on the cross, you are on your own. You have to keep the entire law completely. You can not falter at even one point, which means that we are all in big trouble. None of us can do that. How many of you have stoned your disobedient children lately? I hope not many of you. Jesus satisfied the law completely when he died and rose from the dead.

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⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

Paul is not saying that one can lose one's salvation. Just like John said in 1 John 2:19, if they have "fallen away" they were not in Christ in the first place. They rejected the grace of Jesus and chose to, instead, attempt to justify themselves by their own efforts, an impossible task.

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⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

I want to just touch on the word, 'hope' for a minute. Our English word 'hope' does not carry the same weight as the Greek word from which its translated. We use the word hope as if it is synonymous with a 'wish.' That is not what the biblical word 'hope' means. We might say "I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow." If we were in Arizona we might have good reason to believe that there is a good chance it will not rain on February 1st, but in Campbell River there is only a very faint chance that this might come to pass. That's almost as unlikely as buying a lottery ticket and saying, "I hope I win the lottery."

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Biblical hope is different. **We place our hope in something that has already been guaranteed by a God who is one hundred percent sovereign, all-powerful and completely good, loving and trustworthy. Our hope is secured by Jesus who paid the price for us to be free.**

⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

This is not just a faint hope that it might happen. It's a solid hope based on the promise of God.

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⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Arguing circumcision or not, or the law or not, misses the point, Paul says. It doesn't matter. How many things do we argue about in the church that really don't matter? It's pathetic. When we argue about these kinds of things we totally miss the only thing that is important, ***faith working through love***.

Paul said it's the only thing that matters. There is nothing else. The only thing that matters is that we are allowing the Spirit of Jesus to change our hearts so we can love better. That should give us pause to reflect on the arguments we've had with others, and even the hidden thoughts we've had about others lately.

If your motivation for everything you do, say and think is not love then you are missing the point. You are miserably wasting your life. It's as simple as that. And when we talk about biblical love we don't mean a warm fuzzy feeling. Biblical love is actively meeting the needs of others. It reaches outside ourselves and gets our hands dirty. **The only thing that matters is faith working through love.**

Let's quickly walk through the rest of this.

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⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

That's interesting. Paul asks a question here. ***Who hindered you from obeying the truth?*** Does that seem incongruent with freedom? Wouldn't freedom mean that you can do whatever you want to do? Absolutely not. We've already talked about that. Freedom gives us motivation to walk in obedience to the law of love. Freedom in Christ does not mean we are free to sin. That kind of thinking puts us in bondage again.

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⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

This is probably the most emotional plea from Paul yet. He let's them know how serious he is. Again, he tells them to not compromise and give these Judaizers even an inch. If you give them an inch they will take you a mile down the wrong path. ***A little leaven leavens the whole lump.*** It may seem okay just to give in a little, but Paul said if

you do that they will gather their disciples around them and spread the disease of legalism. This is much too serious to mess around with. Do not give in.

Paul shows his emotion here by telling them that it is so troubling for him that his spiritual children are being led astray that he wishes the culprits who are teaching circumcision would go all the way and castrate themselves. That's pretty crude language. But he is very serious.

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13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Why is all this so important? Because we were called to freedom. And again, it's not that we just live however we want and go around hurting people and living to please ourselves. It's actually the exact opposite.

do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The law is now written on our hearts. It is something the Spirit of Jesus has given us. He is changing us little by little so we can love each other. An impossible task without Jesus.

Notice that Paul says ***"the whole law is fulfilled in one word."*** Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-40 that the entire law is summed up in two commands, ***"Love God and love your neighbour."*** And here Paul says that it's summed up in just one. The reason is because the way we love God is by loving people. That is how we express our love for God. We cannot love God and not love people. It's impossible (1 John 4:20, 21). God's purpose for us is that we would grow in our capacity to love and actively express that love by caring for those around us.

15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

If we choose to live by the law this is what we will do. This is the by-product of someone who thinks that God has called them to live by the law. They will sit in condemnation of others thinking that they are the judge. They will be angry when people are not living up to their standard of living. They will be judgemental, critical, mean people. They will bite and devour each other. That is not the way of Jesus. He has called us to freedom. Freedom brings life. Freedom brings hope. Freedom brings love. And freedom leads to obedience motivated by a deep thankfulness for the grace and love of God that flows out of relationship not obligation.

That is why we are celebrating the Lord's Supper this morning. Take a few minutes and meditate on these truths before we celebrate together.



Galatians: Learning to Live in the Freedom of Christ
Grasping Freedom
Galatians 5:1-15
Week of February 1st, 2015

Objective of this study: to move away from slavery, toward “faith expressing itself through love.”

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 100** meditatively to the group. Then pause for about a minute and let it sink in.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

What inspires you? Or, what is something that you find inspiring?

Word/Work (Combined this week) (50 - 70 minutes)

1. What stood out for you from the sermon?
2. Read Galatians 5:1-15
3. What are some key words in this passage? How often do you see the word ‘love’?

Sermon quote: **“Why did Christ set us free? ... Because love is not possible without freedom. That is the very reason God has given us free choice. In God’s sovereignty, he has given us the ability to choose right or wrong so we could freely love him back.”**

4. **“Yoke of slavery.”** Read Galatians 5:1; Acts 15:10-11 and Matthew 11:28-30. How are these two ‘yokes’ different? What’s the warning? What’s the invitation?
5. How do we sometimes try to put a ‘yoke of slavery’ on each other?

6. **“Faith working through love.”** Read Galatians 5:6.

Sermon quote: **“The only thing that matters is that we are allowing the Spirit of Jesus to change our hearts so we can love better. That should give us pause to reflect on the arguments we’ve had and even the hidden thoughts we’ve had about others lately.”**

Take a look at your own arguments, and thoughts about people. What do you see? What would you rather see?

7. **“The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love”** (verse 6, NIV). We all want to know what is important in life, what matters, so we can know how to invest our time and resources. How does this verse impact your view of what matters? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to grow in this, how to re-focus.
8. Read Galatians 5:7-8.

Sermon quote: **“Freedom gives us motivation to walk in obedience to the law of love.”**

Does this challenge your paradigm? How?

9. Read Galatians 5:13-15 and 1 John 4:20.

Sermon quote: **“The way we love God is by loving people. That is how we express our love for God. We cannot love God and not love people. It’s impossible.”**

How would an attitude of slavery lead to the behaviour described in verse 15? How would freedom lead to loving each other?

10. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Notice what leads to what. That is, what heart conditions lead to what behaviours? How do you suppose this happens?
11. Read 1 Corinthians chapter 13, and let the Holy Spirit speak to you about love.

PRAYER TIME