

The Christian's Freedom

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[0:00] Well, do turn then in your copy of God's Word to Galatians chapter 5. Galatians chapter 5, Galatians chapter 5, we're reading from verse 13 through to the end of the chapter.

And if you have one of the blue church Bibles, that can be found on page 975, 975 of the blue church Bibles. Galatians chapter 5 and verse 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.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.

For these things are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now, the works of the flesh are evident.

[1:33] Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Let's pray and ask for God's help as we come to his Word. Lord Jesus, we ask that you would speak to us now as we come to your Word. It is your voice we long to hear. It is your voice we need to hear. And so by your grace and by the work and power of your Holy Spirit, may you take our eyes where they are blind and help us to see. Wherever our ears are blocked, would you unblock them? Wherever our hearts are cold or hard, would you soften them, warm them, we pray.

Speak to us now that we would be changed to be more like you. And we ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. We've found ourselves, Sarah and I, at home recently watching the new Netflix series, The Little House on the Prairie. I confess I've never read the books and I didn't know the story.

But the story follows the Engels family as they leave Wisconsin after the end of the U.S. Civil War around the 1870s and they head west to Kansas to the prairie. Now, from what I've seen so far, at least, why do people go west? Why do people go to the prairie into largely kind of uncharted territory at that time? Well, there may be lots of different answers for each family, but why do people go to the prairie? What's in common? Why do people go? Freedom. Freedom. That's what people are looking for. A new life away from the old, leaving whatever it is they need to leave behind to go to the prairie for freedom. They go to be free. We've seen these last few weeks that the Christian is free.

The believer in Jesus Christ is free. That is what Paul has been showing these Galatians. We could even say that the Christian is the freest person on earth. The Christian has what Martin Luther called perfect freedom. I wonder if you know that this evening, if you're a believer, that you are the freest person on earth, that you have perfect freedom in Jesus Christ.

[5:20] Well, what have we seen in Galatians so far? Freedom from what? Well, what have we seen so far? We've seen it's freedom from bondage to sin, which was revealed under the law, chapter 3, and freedom from the enslaving idols of the day, chapter 4, verse 8. That the language Paul has used so far in Galatians is very vivid, isn't it? We were held captive. We were imprisoned. We were enslaved.

Life without Christ is not a pretty picture. These are serious things that carry the weight of God's judgment and death. But Paul writes to these Galatians and reminds us this evening that in Christ and in Christ alone, we are free. That's what we're free from. Well, who bought that freedom? Who brought them to that freedom? Well, it is Christ alone, isn't it? It is Jesus alone. The big issue in Galatia is that charlatans have turned up and said, no, no, no, it's Christ plus works of the law. That it's their own effort in law keeping that will make them justified.

But Paul could not have been clearer throughout this letter, could he? We are justified by faith in Christ, not works of the law. So Christ has justified them, rescued them, freed them from sin. And the question we come to this evening that we've been exploring some and we come to this evening is, well, what does that mean for us now? Freedom, chapter 1, verse 5, do you see it there? For freedom, we were set free. And in our verse this evening, chapter 5, 13, freedom again. We have been freed, so what now? How did Charles Wesley put it in his hymn? My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee. That is the experience, the life of a Christian.

[7:23] But with chains off and heart free, as we go to follow Jesus, the question is, well, how will we use our freedom in Christ? Knowing that we are free from the curse of the law, knowing that we are free and no longer need the works of the laws as a means to get right with God, which they could never do anyway, how will they use their freedom? How will we use our freedom? Well, that brings us to our first point then, freedom's direction. Just two points this evening. First one, freedom's direction.

Serve others, not self. Verse 13, you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. So verse 13, they are called to freedom, but the freedom they're called to, verse 13, brings opportunity. It brings an opportunity. As soon as we realize what Christ has done in unshackling us and flinging wide open the prison door and freeing us, and we stare at this amazing world called grace that we now inhabit, Paul says our own sinful flesh, our own desires will want to take over again. And the flesh, the carnal self, the old man, now wants to get into the driving seat. And so Paul straight away jumps in here, verse 13 and 14, and says, no, freedom's direction, freedom's compass point is not inward.

It's not self-ward. Freedom's direction is other-ward, other-facing. Through love serve one another. As the settlers arrive on the prairie, there's a similar question humming along in the background. How will they use this new freedom, this new life that they have in Kansas to indulge their own unbounded desires and dreams in the kind of the middle of nowhere? I suppose some do.

[9:47] Or will they serve the wider community to help build a new life there for others? And some do. Friends, the freedom we have in Christ opens a door of opportunity, and its direction for the Christian is always outward, others-facing. Now, before asking why, I want us to ask, why does Paul address this now? Why does this sort of bubble up in our passage, this question here?

Well, Paul has taken the most kind of powerful TNT, hasn't he, to the Judaizers' line of thinking these last few chapters, and he's blown apart their arguments. Works of the law are no good to you for justification. Circumcision is no use to you for justification. Getting right with God is as simple as trusting in Christ and receiving him by faith. The Christian is free because of all that Christ has done.

But he anticipates, kind of pastorally, the response. Can I do what I want then? Is this Christian faith just kind of an easy believism? Well, I've ticked the Jesus box. It's all by faith through grace. So now, do I just kind of crack on and do what I want?

To put it another way, he's kind of detonated and blown apart legalism, the main issue in the book. And now he wants to ensure that the believers here don't fall into the other side of the ditch, into antinomianism, a licentiousness. And actually, verse 21, he's warned them of this before, that the gospel ridge, the gospel road that Christ has set them on, is not one that they got onto themselves by legalism. Nor is it a road they're kept on by legalism and works of the law. But it is not one either that is to lead to licentiousness and kind of live as you please. Put even simpler, Christ has bought them. They are free from sin.

And now they need to know what their freedom is for. And he's told them their freedom is for others. And so why? Why does he say this? Why is that how it is? Well, there are many answers.

[12:15] We could point to the example of Christ himself. There is no freer being than God. Yet he, well, what did he do? He came in Christ, not to be served, but to serve. This is what Christ did.

Paul could have pointed to Jesus' example and said, as Jesus lived that way, so you live that way. But Paul doesn't reach for that, even though it's true. So why are we to have freedom that's directed towards others? Why outward facing? Well, what does he say?

Because it fulfills the law. Because it fulfills the law. Now, this is brilliant from Paul. I mean, the whole thing is brilliant, okay? But this is brilliant from Paul. Because he's reorienting the law for these Christians. These Christians would have been worried about law keeping.

And he's told them that law keeping is not part of justification, as the circumcision party are saying. So what about the law for people that are worried about law keeping? Well, he says the law is not to be completely torn up and put out in the rubbish bin, or kind of ignored or put away on a shelf.

No, it has a place in the Christian's life in showing us how to live. We can't keep the law to get right with God. But when we are right with God through Jesus Christ, the law shows us how to live, and we fulfill it by following the Lord Jesus and loving others. Perhaps we could put it this way.

[13:47] If I wanted to move to, say, I don't know, Kansas, okay, in the United States, and I told the embassy, say, please accept me into the US as a US citizen, please accept me, because for the past 10 years, I've been keeping US laws. I've been using dollars. I've been driving on the right side of the road.

I've been paying my taxes, not to HMRC, but to the IRS. Would they let me in on that basis? No. They'd say, that's really odd. In fact, you're probably in a lot of trouble in your own country for doing that.

But if your visa application is received, and you arrive in the new country, the laws now what? Show you how to live. Not how to get in, but for life there. And it's something like that Paul is saying here. The law doesn't get you in. Jesus does. But now that you belong to Christ, the law is fulfilled by loving others. And here then, in these verses 13, 14, 15, we arrive at something of the kind of paradox of the Christian life.

Here's how Martin Luther puts it in his work on the freedom of a Christian. A Christian is utterly free, Lord of all, subject to none.

[15:08] A Christian is utterly dutiful, servant of all, subject to all. a Christian is utterly free lord of all subject to none a Christian is utterly dutiful servant of all subject to all this is what Paul is saying here there is no person on earth freer than the Christian not even death has a hold over us now no we are free free from death and sin and hell and the curse of the law utterly free in Christ but that freedom comes now meaning we face others utterly dutiful servant of all subject to all so dear friend let me ask you this evening how are you using how are you using your Christian freedom husbands how are you using your Christian freedom are we asking how can I serve my wife to make her grow in the Lord wives we can ask the same question back to you how are you serving your husband help him grow in the Lord brothers and sisters we can ask one another in this church family are we asking how can I help others grow spiritually in Christ in this church how can I use my gifts my talents my money to bless and strengthen others if we're asking those kind of questions then praise God because that is the heart of a free person speaking how can I use what God has given me to bless and serve others but if that question how can I love others how can I lay down my rights my time all that I have for others if that sounds like slavery if that sounds like being shackled then dear friend you don't know what freedom is yet and you're facing the wrong direction and what happens when people in church face the wrong direction well verse 14 happens biting devouring have you ever seen dogs fight have you ever seen cats screeching at each other these are grim sights are they not something like akin to that is what happens when people in churches face inwards they bite and devour as one commentator writes when the flesh takes over when freedom faces inwards church life becomes like a chapter out of Lord of the Flies and I actually think something like that is happening in the church in

Galatia there are hints of Galatia there are hints of that and so how do we avoid that or put it the other way how do we face others when the flesh would have us face in on ourselves and that takes us to our second point first this evening freedom's direction faces others not self second freedom's gate walk by the spirit not by the flesh verse 16 Paul writes but I say walk by the spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh and verse 24 towards the end of our passage if we live by the spirit let us also keep in step with the spirit and so dear friend do you know that you can spot a Christian by how they walk did you know that by their gate okay now just to be clear and not as was

pointed out to me by my children this morning thinking I'd made a spelling error on the sheet okay not g-a-t-e okay not the gate to their home but their g-a-i-t their cadence their gate their step their stride it's not a word we use very much but I remember once going to the running shop around the other end of Union Street there and they said well measure your running gate okay you you can spot a Christian by their gate their stride their step did you know that that's what Paul says here walk by the spirit keep in step with the spirit now of course he isn't meaning physically okay he's talking about their spiritual step how they walk spiritually you can spot a Christian because their spiritual journey their life is dependent upon guided by rooted in directed however you want to put it by the spirit of God and life that way means verse 16 you will overcome and not gratify the desires of the flesh and so what's the reality of life for a Christian even after we belong to the Lord Jesus and he's rescued us and he has won the reality is the battle continues when the allies landed on the Normandy beaches victory was won but the battle raged on for many months when we have life in Christ and the spirit is within us the victory is won the spirit has overcome the flesh but the battle rages on freedom's gate step is life in Christ and not the flesh the spirit overcomes but it is a battle so where do we see that well verse 17 the spirit and the flesh are opposed friends have you ever felt that I am trying to live I am trying to love and serve others how God would have me how he shows me to how he tells me to but I find it so hard instead of loving words

I end up with harsh words instead of kind actions I find myself with selfish actions instead of building up I find that I'm tearing down I find myself pulled towards things I do not want pulled towards well that is the battle that the war of the flesh against the spirit and so brothers and sisters if we belong to the Lord Jesus we need to remember tonight that that battle that war still rages within us so what do we do with that is it all bad news well no it's not all bad news yes the presence of sin in our life is not something we want it is awful and bad and we want rid of it but the presence of that battle in your life is a sign of spiritual health when you become a Christian you will never be more justified than you were then than you are now you are right before God he is yours and you are his but in terms of our sanctification or being made more made more like him there is a journey ahead that journey will be over in heaven but not before and so we need to remember that between now and then when Christ calls us home our old self will want to keep pulling us back even though it has been defeated put another way if we forget we're at war we what happens we lower our defenses and that is when the flesh flares up and we give in and we start consuming one another and so what are we to do with this well in the words of John Owen he said this be killing sin or it will be killing you be living in the spirit or we will be gratifying the desires of the flesh there is no neutral ground or party here there is no no man's land the spirit in the flesh are opposed be living in the spirit or we will be gratifying the desires of the flesh and so how do we know if we are living by the spirit we are called to walk by the spirit to live in the spirit how do we know we are I said you can spot a Christian by their spiritual walk what does it look like what does life in the spirit look like or conversely what does life living out the desires of the flesh look like well Paul tells us and he shows us that you don't need to be kind of rebus or parrot or whatever kind of detective to work it out the desires of the flesh have works and shifting kind of metaphor he says the spirit bears fruit we can spot it because there are is ugly work of the flesh and there is oh such beautiful fruit and so that's what he goes on to show us what is this work of the flesh well there they are in verses 19 to 21 and verse 21 tells us they're not meant to be exhaustive it's these and things like these now we can group these works of the flesh into kind of roughly three themes verse 19 sexual sins these are unrestrained sexual sins and sensuality second verse 20 at the start idolatry and sorcery that is false worship so sexual sins false worship and then the rest are kind of society facing sins if you like their their social sins sins that fracture and bring huge disharmony and and discord to church family life together and these are all such ugly things are they not if you've ever been on the receiving end when someone has been behaving in some of these ways in that third part of the list it's awful stuff you've seen any of it playing out in church life

it's awful awful stuff and the consequences of living this way what does paul say at the end of verse 21 those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of god now to be clear paul means to keep living in these things in a way that is unrepentant deliberate continual life in these ways and we will not inherit god's kingdom he isn't speaking about if someone sins in one of these ways and repents and comes to the lord jesus and by the power of his spirit changes by god's grace but he is saying if we set a course to walk through life in these ways christ's kingdom is not ours for these ways are not christ's and so oh dear friends flee these things flee these things heed paul's warning as soon as these desires flare up in your flesh and they do for all of us division sensualities jealousy flee

from them and run to jesus put that thought to death be ruthless with it do not let it bud indeed verse 24 verse 24 paul says if we belong to jesus we've crucified the flesh and its desires and passions it no longer rules over us crucifixion is a decisive act that does what brutally kills and so when these things raise up in the believer in our flesh we say to them we are dead to you now we are dead to you now we are dead to you we are dead to you we are dead to you now we no longer belong to you they were crucified with christ and if you've never turned to jesus then please heed paul's warning jesus is bringing a kingdom and if we're living apart from him outside of him then we're not in it but you can be you can be you can have the freedom christ brings to all who are his just ask jesus turn to him come to him and he'll let you in and you know what you don't need to have it all in order to do that you might be here this evening and say ben i have some of these very things going on in my life oh dear friend none of that stops you coming indeed it's the very reason to come you don't have to get healthy and cleaned up to come to dr jesus you come precisely because you're sick and he will receive you and his spirit will begin to work in you to put all these things to death and so freedom does not look like the ugly works of the flesh freedom is life in the spirit so what does that look like it looks like glorious fruit glorious fruit now as i was writing the sermon this week i had there's a sing the bible we listen to slugs and bugs i had that going around in my head then it goes the fruit of the spirit some of you must know it's not a tomato it's not a papaya okay it's not any of those things okay it's spiritual fruit you can listen to it on the ride home this evening when you're driving home from church right it's wonderful stuff it's not a tomato it's not a papaya what is it it's spiritual fruit verse 22 the fruit of the spirit is love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness self-control again such things there is no law what a contrast is it not beautiful and the main thing i want us to focus on this evening is is the love that's at the first one there love and i think that's deliberate paul in verse 13 says through love serve one another and that love is produced by the spirit love is the source the fountain the the center of all in the

christian life john records jesus words doesn't he this is how the world will know you're my disciples if you love one another how many of our problems in the christian life or or in the the church come because we don't love one another now that doesn't mean we have to be doormats it doesn't mean we have to agree on what color the carpet is or all these numbers of things no but what does it mean it means this giving ourselves for others that they might be strengthened in christ that's what love means so friends next time someone upsets you ask the question how can i give myself for them to build them up and strengthen them in christ and notice with this list these glorious fruits where do they come from where does this love come from where do all these fruits come from ourselves no the good news is we don't need to kind of summon up the strength for these things ourselves we we don't look inward for the love it's a fruit of the spirit god works these things in us we just need to ask him we just need to look to him to listen to him to trust him and this fruit will grow and ripen within us all our days and so dear friend if if we're thinking this evening do i now just need to to check my step to see if these fruit are here do i need to keep looking inward i think the answer is no no the answer for these things to grow is to keep looking upward keep looking to god himself fix your eyes on jesus and know that by his spirit these things will be all being worked in you well as we close the very best thing people could do on the prairie was to lay down their life and self and love others and to use their freedom that others could live and dear friends in a much much more profound way that is true for us in christ's church the very best thing you can do for our church family for this church family is to use your freedom to serve you are free brother and sister no one is freer on earth but precisely because you're free keep in step with the spirit that you may love your neighbor and so fulfill the law of god let's pray lord jesus we thank you so much that for freedom you have set us free we thank you that you have sent your spirit to work in our lives to make us more like jesus we do pray then that you would help us to fix our eyes on him our great savior so that in our lives we would see these fruit of the spirit bud and grow and flourish not by looking inward but by looking looking upward looking to you trusting you and trusting your work to sanctify us and make us more like jesus father where the works of the flesh have overtaken us where we are indulging some of these things help us to put it to death knowing these things no longer reign over us that these things were crucified with christ they have no place in our lives and help us to turn to the the balm of healing that we have in the lord jesus and in his blood so we thank you for this gospel this one gospel of the lord jesus help us to bask in the glorious freedom the pardon and new life that we have in christ through christ all for the glory of christ help us to do that in each of our lives we ask in jesus name amen