

“STAYING ON TRACK (Galatians 5)”
Galatians 5:1-15

In 1941, as the United States tried to reassure itself over the War being fought in Europe, Franklin D Roosevelt delivered a speech in which he spoke of “The Four Freedoms” which he believed were the inalienable right of all human beings. A couple of years later, Norman Rockwell, whose witty paintings illustrated *The Saturday Evening Post* for many years, painted what was to become his most famous work: a series depicting “The Four Freedoms” – Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear, Freedom of Speech and Freedom to Worship. Since then, the United States has been doing its level best to impose those freedoms on the rest of the world.

But centuries before that, St Paul was writing to the fledgling Christian church in Galatia (now part of Turkey) to remind them that freedom was the gift to all people which had been won by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Over the past few weeks, as Liz and I have been working through this *Letter To The Galatians*, we’ve seen that he was absolutely desperate to impress on the followers of Jesus Christ that at the very foundation of our faith is a freedom which we must firmly grasp and fully enjoy.

Using examples and arguments from the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – and from his own personal experience, Paul has drummed into these Galatians that the cosmic battle which took place on the very first Good Friday between Jesus Christ and the forces of evil was the final battle in a war of liberation, a struggle for the very soul of humanity. The victory of Jesus on the cross, sealed by his victory over death on Easter Sunday, meant that men and women no longer had to be enslaved by sin. Until then, there had really been no choice but to sin, and each failure to keep the Law of Moses had meant the need for all kinds of ritual and sacrifice in an attempt to work our way back into God’s good books, without really any guarantee that we’d ever succeed.

That whole concept was bolstered up, in the system that the Jews had tried to stick to for centuries, by a plethora of rules and regulations which were intended to enable people to get closer to God, but which – as they increased in number and demands – served only to remind people of actually how far they were away from him. But still they tried to stick to them, slavishly (literally) attempting to get every last bit right and relying on their success to get them into heaven. As we have seen, their success was limited and the only real result was a desperate sense of guilt all the time – a sense which we still experience today if we try to sort things out our own way.

And once again in this passage, Paul stresses that freedom which Jesus Christ won for us on the cross – freedom from slavery to sin, freedom from rule and rituals, freedom from guilt, freedom from anxiety about our eternal future. We have been freed from these things in order to be able to enjoy the real freedom of life in Christ – freedom at last to be fully human, able to make the most of the life that God always intended us to have. But Paul is still anxious that these Christians in Galatia – and, indeed, Christians down through the ages – do not spoil it all by slipping back into the old ways, into that former reliance on their own strength and ability to do right all the time, because, as we’ve seen, it’s actually impossible to do that under our own steam.

In this passage, the old ways are signified by circumcision, a physical mark which was intended to denote a person’s allegiance to God. When God first gave Abraham the sign of circumcision, it was as a marker of their incorporation into his people. He made a promise to Abraham – a promise from his own gracious nature – that he would bless Abraham and all his descendants who had faith in him. The sign that people were recipients of that promise was circumcision. Unfortunately, over the centuries, circumcision came to be seen as a *means* of getting into God’s good books, rather than as an acknowledgement that you were already there, so Galatian Gentiles who were not Jewish were being forced to be circumcised as a rite of entry into the faith. Paul is saying that that’s wrong – there is no entry qualification whatsoever, other than believing in God and receiving his gift of grace. The old rulebooks have been shredded, the old rituals declared obsolete. All that you need has been done by Jesus himself.

And as Paul stresses this yet again – Jesus has given us freedom of choice, so make use of it – the thrust of his letter changes. This chapter marks the transition from the doctrinal to the ethical. In each of Paul’s letters you can see this happening. He starts off setting out the basis of his faith, usually emphasising one aspect of it (the aspect that his readers particularly need to hear), and then he shows how that doctrine, that theology, that belief should make an obvious difference to the believer’s life. In other words, this is how we should live in the light of what he has said about the Christian faith. He pulls together belief and behaviour.

In v7, Paul calls it “*obeying the truth*”. John Stott puts it like this: “*Living the Christian life is not just to believe the truth (as if Christianity were nothing but orthodoxy), nor just to behave well (as if it were moral uprightness), but to ‘obey the truth’, applying belief to behaviour.*” You see, we’re getting to the bit now which will perhaps answer some of the questions that might have been forming in our minds over the past few weeks. Paul has majored on this freedom, on this fact that there is **nothing** we need to do to get into God’s good books: we’re there already. We do not need to keep to a strict code of behaviour to ensure that God loves us. We are totally free of all those rules and regulations. ***There is nothing to do!*** Therefore, we can’t get it wrong – all we need to do is believe.

The question that then arises – and Paul has to write to the Romans about it, too (*Romans 6:1,15*) – the question is: if there is total freedom in Christ, does it matter at all how we behave? God forgives us, so why don’t we try to get the maximum benefit from that and do all that we can to provide him with opportunities to forgive? But it doesn’t work like that. That means freedom has turned to licence. In Liz’s memorable phrase from last week, “*we need to distinguish running free from running wild*”. It isn’t an “anything goes” kind of freedom.

Paul writes here in v6, “*The only thing that counts is faith ...*” All we need do is believe, but he qualifies it by continuing, “*expressing itself in love*”. In other words, if you do believe that Jesus has set you free, you’ll demonstrate it in the way you relate to the world around you. Your outlook will no longer be entirely selfish, but you’ll want to ensure that your behaviour, especially as regards other people, reflects the love of Jesus Christ which you are now able to enjoy. The guiding principle of the believer’s life is love. And Paul expands on that in vv13-15. To counter the anticipated objections from those who would criticise Paul for giving licence to Christians to behave exactly as they please as they enjoy their new-found freedom from sin, guilt and rules, he points out three things that this freedom is **not**.

1. IT IS NOT FREEDOM TO INDULGE THE SINFUL NATURE (v13)

“*The sinful nature*” is Paul’s way of referring to what we were like before we accepted Jesus’ offer of freedom and new life. It was “*the sinful nature*” because we were **naturally** inclined to sin – there seemed to be no choice. In some versions of the Bible it’s translated as “*the flesh*” or “*the old nature*”. If you’re not too sure what that means, Paul gives you a fairly clear idea in vv19-21. He uses lists like this in several of his letters and the temptation for us is to look at the first few things and assume that they are not really applicable to us – after all, most of us would say that we are pretty well free of “*sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft*”. And so we don’t read the rest of the list with too much attention – even if we flick over to the end of the list, we read of “*drunkenness, orgies, and the like*” (whatever “*the like*” may be!).

But look at what else he includes – “*hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy*”. Now, I know we’re not supposed to judge, but that doesn’t mean you don’t notice certain things! I reckon you’ll see half of those over coffee after the service, and probably indulge in the other half yourself before lunch is over. How many of us can say that we are completely free from jealousy and envy, that we never lose our temper, that we don’t enjoy the odd bit of gossip at someone else’s expense? I’d have to put my hand up to quite a bit of that, and I don’t think I’m in any way atypical.

Even if you only indulge in the odd bit of jealousy or envy and try to justify it by saying that it doesn't hurt anyone else directly, you can't deny that it can easily poison a relationship over time or cause a marked change in attitude as it gets a grip on your mind, your heart, your soul. It is certainly not allowing love to be the guiding principle. And even if no-one else does spot it, you are indulging the sinful nature. That's not what freedom is all about.

2. **IT IS NOT FREEDOM TO EXPLOIT MY NEIGHBOUR** (vv13b, 15)

Don't envy your neighbour. Don't harbour feelings of jealousy towards her or him. Don't concentrate on your own pleasure and fulfilment at the expense of others. You see, all those things have consequences for other people, they all eventually have an effect on relationships and on attitudes. Paul says that our freedom in Christ should be an opportunity for us to serve one another, not to exploit one another. We hear a lot of talk about democratic freedoms and the ways in which we in the prosperous West are to fight for and enjoy our freedom. Before long the terminology turns to talk of human rights – and I do not want to deny the powerful influence the Church has properly had on the struggle for human rights. But we have now reached the stage where human rights have all but eclipsed any notion of human responsibility: human rights has now become my inalienable right to do what I want, how I want, when I want, where I want – and stuff anyone who tries to stop me or gets in the way.

That might be freedom as a post-Enlightenment Western liberal democracy sees it, but it's certainly not what Paul has in mind here. This is a freedom to serve others, not to freedom to “*keep on biting and devouring one another*” (which is what the current over-emphasis on individual human rights leads to – my rights inevitably impinge on the rights of others and in the end it's the one who can afford the best lawyer who wins). It is a freedom to serve others without having to worry about myself – after all, Jesus has sorted me out: I know where I'm going, I know what I'm doing, I'm free of the constant necessity to forge my own destiny, to improve my own image, to feather my own nest and cover my own back all the time. Serve one another, don't destroy one another.

And don't forget the wider world. This isn't just about individual freedom, individual rights. We have a duty as a nation that is still considered Christian and free to serve our brothers and sisters in other parts of this broken and hurting world. I received a publication from the Department for International Development this week and was pleased to see that the Disasters Emergency Committee – a quango set up to respond to tragedies in the developing world – includes four explicitly Christian charities, and those charities, I know, do even more to try and help the poor and disadvantaged of this world out of sight of the media who gather when there is a disaster, in between the tsunamis and hurricanes, where human lives are being lost because of our indulgence of the sinful nature, our readiness to exploit others rather than serving them in the freedom of Christ.

3. **IT IS NOT FREEDOM TO DISREGARD THE LAW** (v14)

Here's the rub, you see. We are told that we are free from the demands of the Law – and indeed we are, so long as we are talking about the need to keep the Law in order to get into God's good books. But as Paul has just said, we need to believe in that grace, in that promise that we are safe in God's hands and that belief, that faith is expressed in love (v6). In fact, he says here in v14, that is actually what the Law is all about anyway. So the argument is that we believe in God's grace – that we are guaranteed an eternity with him. The fact that we believe is shown by our love for God and for each other – serving each other and resisting the opportunity to exploit one another. And, in fact, that love is really what the Law was all about anyway – “*The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'*” Behind that is, as Jesus pointed out before Paul, love for him – “*If you obey my commands, you remain in my love*” (John 15:10). William Barclay puts it like this: “*The Christian faith is founded not on a book but on a person; its dynamic is not obedience to any law but love to Jesus Christ.*” The two things are

inextricably linked: our freedom from the law is based on our relationship with God and our relationship with God is demonstrated through our keeping the law of love.

So we are not free to **break** the law – we always ended up doing that. That was the thing we were enslaved by. We are now free to **fulfil** the law – Jesus has given us that choice. We are now free to live as God wants us to. We can choose to do right, rather than always having to fight against doing wrong. That's where the freedom actually comes in.

So those of you who were starting to wonder just what kind of ethical system this was that allowed everyone complete freedom to do as they wished, whatever the consequences, can now see, I hope, that the faith we have in God and his infinite grace should lead us naturally into a life of love for our neighbour and a keen desire to do what God wants. Those who do not use their freedom to do the right thing have clearly not grasped quite what this grace is all about. Just as originally circumcision was a sign of those who had been included in God's covenant of grace, but later came to be seen as a means of getting God's grace, so living a life of loving concern cannot be a means of getting God's grace, but is a sign of those who have taken the decision to accept that grace already.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then.” Are you ready to do that?

(Discussion notes on next page)

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Questions for discussion

1. Do you think of Christianity as a way of life characterised by freedom? Why/why not?
2. Why do you think Paul always starts off with a doctrinal argument before getting to the ethical part?
3. What do you understand by "*obeying the truth*" (v7)?
4. How do we manage the tension between human rights and human responsibilities? How can we ensure that an authentic Christian voice is heard in the debate?
5. Is there anything distinctively Christian about an ethic founded on love? Isn't it all a bit vague? And how do you answer the question about freedom and behaviour?