

It's Better to be Free
Stadium Village Church
August 12, 2007
Galatians 5:1-13

We have been studying the book of Galatians. This book was written by the Apostle Paul to churches in the region of Galatia. We are not totally sure of what churches they were, but they were in the region which is now part of the country of Turkey.

We have not mentioned much about the structure of the book, but in order to see where we have been and where we are going it might be good to just glance at the structure of the book. There appears to be a chiasmic structure – in other words, there is a symmetry to the book around a center point. We have, more or less, been spending one Sunday on each part of the chiasm. Today, we are focusing on the justification by faith – the second one. However, many commentaries do not recognize this structure as being important. It does give us a way of thinking about the whole book and its various parts.

This letter from Paul focuses on one main point – freedom in Jesus Christ. The reason for this focus was that the people within the churches in Galatia were faced with a dilemma. They had become devoted followers of Jesus. They had come to believe that Jesus Christ was the only Son of God who had died for their sins; and that God had given them His Spirit to dwell with them. But now there were some teachers who were going around telling them that they needed to also obey the laws and regulations of that were given to the Israelites 1500 years earlier. This is what we call the Law and is found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This was a comprehensive set of laws that covered how to worship, how to treat your neighbor, property rights, criminal punishment, and so forth. One important regulation was the rite of circumcision for all males. The Christians in Galatia were faced with the decision – do they need to obey these regulations, even if they were not Jewish and had never obeyed all these regulations? In other words, does one have to believe in Jesus Christ AND obey these laws and regulations given to the Jewish people?

Paul's response to this issue was about as strong as it can be. He uses language that we might consider vulgar in making his points. He condemns those who are teaching the Galatians to follow the Law. And in today's portion, he goes so far as to say that if they seek to obey the Law they will actually be alienated from Christ and fall from grace. Paul had no doubt in his mind.

To understand the meaning of this part of Galatians and how it applies to us, I would like to consider three questions about our freedom in Jesus Christ:

- Why it's important?
- Why it's better?
- How do we live it?

FIRST, why was freedom in Christ important, even essential for the Galatians? The freedom that we have in Christ is obviously important – we see that in how Paul responds. But we should also see that it is important to God. It is not trite that God through Jesus died on the cross to set us free. It was not just to make our lives easier and more convenient. There must be something much more than just getting us around following the Law.

What is it that makes this freedom so important that Jesus would come down to earth to die? How is it that living free from the Law is so much better than living under the Law? Let's look again at the first few verses of today's passage:

^{Gal 5:1} 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.

^{Gal 5:2} Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

^{Gal 5:3} Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

Gal 5:4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (NIV)

Paul was telling the Galatians that if they abided by the Law, if they tried to be justified by obeying the Law, they would fall away from the grace that Jesus Christ offers. They would be saying that Christ's death was not needed, that they were OK without the death of Jesus on the cross. This is the primary concern of Paul. If a person trusts in their own efforts to please God, that person is setting aside what Jesus Christ has done when He suffered and died on the cross. This cheapens what cost God a very high price – the death of His Son.

Is this a problem today? I think the problem is very wide spread. In a poll taken by the AARP of people over 50 years of age, it was found that while most people think they will go to heaven when they die, only about 20% of all respondents believed that getting to heaven was dependent on believing in Jesus Christ. Many people have substituted something for what Christ has done on the cross.

And for those who are followers of Jesus Christ, when we don't fully embrace the fact that our sins are completely forgiven and we that we are free from the Law, we often do things for the wrong reasons. We may do good works to make sure of God's favor, or out of guilt.

SECOND, why is it better to live in the freedom that Jesus Christ provides? In some ways, living under the Law is like riding a bike with training wheels. The intent of the wheels is good – they are to keep us from falling and getting hurt. But training wheels really limit how we can ride. Think if people had to have training wheels when they knew how to keep their balance when they rode a bicycle. What if the riders in the Tour de France had to use training wheels? It would be very difficult to turn, sprint, and even finish the race.

Similarly, the Law is good in that it attempts to keep us upright and from getting hurt and from hurting others – but if we had the ability to live without being constrained by limits and yet be living in a way that pleases God, think how much better things would be.

Gal 5:7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? (NIV)

Like trusting in training wheels, if a child keeps on using training wheels, they will not learn how to really ride a bike. They will be kept from riding like they really could and should. And if a person knows how to ride a bike, and then you put on training wheels, it actually makes the ability to ride a bicycle without training wheels useless – you cannot lean into a corner and ride like you suppose to.

Paul told the Galatians is that if they relied on the Law, it would prevent them from living the way that God had intended. Like a bicyclist who is impeded by the training wheels or like a runner who has been cut off the track, they could not live the wonderful life that God had intended and for which Jesus Christ had died on the cross to make possible.

It should also be remembered that this freedom is not a license to what is wrong. In verse 13 we read:

Gal 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

The freedom in Christ is NOT to allow us to do whatever we want to satisfy our desires. Jesus Christ didn't die on the cross so that we could partake in any kind of sin we want. The freedom we have in Christ is not opposed to what the Law was intended to do – keep people from doing things that were wrong, things that would hurt people, and things that did not align with the character of God. The Law was intended to keep people from killing, stealing, lying, taking another persons husband or wife, and so on. The Law is not wrong; in fact it reflects God's holiness, His ways, His intentions for humans. They did not adequately work in keeping humans living as they should, but the commands are good.

So nobody should take the position that because they are free, they can go ahead and sin. Or, after sinning and being caught, say, "well, it is not so bad, I am free from the Law." That is not what freedom is about.

Living a life of love by the power of the Holy Spirit is like knowing how to ride a bike without training wheels. We can go farther and faster than with training wheels, AND we don't need the limits of the training wheels – by the power of the Spirit we are kept from falling. And like in life, it doesn't

mean we will never fall, it does mean that most often we are not testing the limits – we are riding far and fast without trying to see how much we can lean before we fall.

FINALLY, how do we apply this today? How is this even relevant for us today who don't know much about the Old Testament Law? Many of us would say that we are already free – we are not trying to keep the old Law. We don't think of circumcision as being an important part of being a follower of Jesus, if at all. We don't worry about the food that we eat, working on the Sabbath, and so on. It seems that we are pretty free already, maybe even too free.

I believe what makes it relevant is that while we are in our minds not bound by the OT Law, we are constantly tempted to develop a system of rules for ourselves and others. For example, if I decide that to be a good follower of Jesus, one must read the Bible daily for 30 minutes, one must pray for 30 minutes, one must go to church every Sunday, give 10 per cent of the income to the church, attend a small group meeting each week, and so on, I have made a new system of Law. It is somewhat different from the Old Testament Law, but it has the same intents and the same weaknesses. There is nothing wrong with each of those requirements – the intent is good. But like the old Law, it cannot be adequate. Even if I obey each of the commands, it doesn't guarantee that I will be living like God really wants. I can do all those things and still be unkind, unloving, and prejudiced against others. But people may not see that – they may see that I look pretty good – I do the right things to look like a follower of Jesus.

It can even get more complicated. What about telling others about Jesus, what we would call witnessing or evangelizing. We believe that everyone should be telling others the good news about Jesus – that He lived, He died, He rose again, He went back to heaven and will return one day. That is very good to do and I can add it to the list of things that I require people to do. So now, if I read the Bible, pray, give money to the church, go to church and small group every week, AND tell others about Jesus, I am really doing pretty well. But I can still be very unloving, unkind, and have a lousy attitude.

We don't struggle with the OT Law, but we can struggle with our New Law. It can be just as dangerous for the same two reasons that the old Law was dangerous for the Galatians: it will tend to replace my total dependence on the death of Jesus for my being forgiven for my sins; AND it will tend to cause me to live by a set of rules rather than living by faith in the power of the Spirit. It will limit how "good" I will be. Rather than relying on the Holy Spirit to guide me to do what is best, I will limit what I do to obeying the rules I have established. God has much more for us than our rules.

What is the solution? How can we live without a "law" and not fall into satisfying our wrong desires? And, how can we live in such a way that we are actually more effective than with a Law? How can we live life with the excitement of NO TRAINING WHEELS? Paul's answer was to live a life of love – by faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul is urging the Galatians, and every one who follows Jesus Christ, to live a life that is directed by the Spirit. Rather than living by a set a rules, God is wanting to live within us helping us to live the right way. That is a whole different way of living than trying to live by the rules. My illustration of training wheels doesn't adequately describe the change. It is like God lives within us to help us keep our balance without the support of the training wheels. But it is so much more than that.

What does this life look like? Paul describes it as a life in the Spirit, a life of love, a life which is lived by faith in Jesus. I believe that God is inviting each one of us to live this way. If we turn our lives over to Him, have faith in Him and what Jesus Christ has done, God will come and live in us by the Holy Spirit. Perfectly submitted we would be able to live each moment for Him. That is our high goal and calling. That is the kind of life that Jesus lived – completely submitted to the will of the Father and filled with the Spirit. Granted, He was truly God, but He lived His life as a model for how we should live.

I think God gives us other tastes of what it can be like. We can read about others who have lived before us and see how the Spirit guided them. God also puts people in our lives who can be examples for how to live in the Spirit.

I think that God also gives us a high standard by which to live – we are to be perfect, we are to be telling others about what Jesus has done, we are to be His hands and feet bring His healing and hope

to those around us. It often hits us that we can't do that. There is no way that I can figure out how to do all that. I think when we come to that point is when God says – well let Me do it through you. If you turn over control to me, I, through the Spirit, will live in you to guide and empower you to do My will.

God, it seems, lets us work on our own for a while. He may even bless this work with some success but He wants us to come to that point where we say, "I can't do this on my own. I need to turn it over to God, let Him direct and empower." That is the Spirit filled life of love based on faith that God is looking for.

But it doesn't happen automatically. God doesn't in a snap of the finger make us live the life of love. In the next two weeks we are going to be looking at the last part of Galatians. Paul gave the Galatians, and I believe us, some directions in coming to that way of living. One command that Paul keeps coming back to is to love. "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love, serve one another in love, and the whole Law is summed up in this, 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" Paul saw that love was result of the Spirit's work in one's life – but in order to have that happen, we as followers of Jesus need to cooperate with the Spirit in loving our neighbor.

How do we make progress in this? I have wondered what Paul would say to us? Are we practicing what Paul wrote the Galatians? I know that I am not completely practicing what Paul said. What would SVC look like if we would whole-heartedly put into practice what Paul is advocating?

What concerns me is that we look at these words that Paul wrote and agree with them. We can go out of this room saying that these words are really true and good, that we should even try to put them into practice. But if someone asks us in a few days what the sermon is about, how many of us can remember? By the way, that isn't only true for those listening to the sermon – sometimes the person giving the sermon can't remember right away what the sermon was about.

Growing in living a Spirit-filled life of love is a transformational process. It doesn't happen by itself but is a Spirit activity. We have a choice – we can either resist the Spirit's working in our lives or we can embrace His working and collaborate with Him. I believe that there are two things that we can do to cooperate with the Spirit in causing transformation:

First, practice the spiritual disciplines such as reading the Bible, praying, fasting, solitude, meditation, witnessing, and so forth. While they may seem to cause instant changes in your life, like doing physical exercises, they gradually lead to transformation. Some might argue – isn't that going against the message of Galatians of not living under a Law. While it can lead to that if you trust the disciplines to save you, but the message of Galatians is that we should not try to EARN our salvation, our right standing with God. On the other hand, God expects us to make efforts to obey his Word. That is why Paul gives advice, even commands on how to live. He is by no means telling the Galatians to do that to make sure you are saved, rather they are to make an EFFORT to live a life of love BECAUSE they are saved. The differences externally may not be very evident, but they are significant. My efforts to EARN favor with God will not be successful and will lead to legalism and judging of others. My EFFORTS to cooperate with the Spirit will lead to real transformation in my life.

Second, most of us need the help of others in even making the effort to cooperate with the Spirit. Making the spiritual disciplines a regular habit doesn't come easy, BUT having others encourage us can be of great help. One way to accomplish this is by being in relationship with one or more people with whom we mutually submit. Having a few other people with whom we can share our struggles, who can ask us how we are doing, who will pray for us and encourage us is vital to the transformational process.

That is why we encourage everyone who is part of SVC to be in a discipleship group, a small group, some sort of group in which these things can take place. I would encourage you to make that part of your life. Obviously, it should be men with men and women with women. I would encourage you to get into such a relationship. If you believe God is calling you to do so, and you need some suggestions in how to find the right person or persons, please let me know. If you have already, and it hasn't happened, please let me know again. I am convinced this is important for every believer.