

# GALATIANS 5

## Real Series (Part 5)

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Good morning, Christ Church. As I was reading through chapter 5 of Paul's Letter to the Galatians – the text we're going to be studying today – I was struck by the remarkable relevance of the opening verse to the National Holiday we've recognized this morning. It was so obvious that I wondered if God did not intend us to be at precisely this point in our study of Galatians today. Listen to God's Word as it comes to us from Galatians 5, verse 1: **<sup>1</sup> 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.**

As that verse and tomorrow's holiday reminds us, sometimes freedom takes time to achieve its full effect. History demonstrates that the yoke of slavery, in its many forms, is not easily shed. Our sinful tendency to dehumanize and injure others is very old and familiar to every nation and is THE reason why we need Christ as our Savior.

As you know, the Emancipation Proclamation ending the institution of chattel slavery went into legal effect on January 1, 1863. President Abraham Lincoln intended that, as of that date, all the shackles of slavery were to be shed. Four million people – made in God's image and precious to Him – were finally to be granted the liberty and opportunity that even our nation's founding documents declared as a God-given right. And yet, as a matter of fact, it was not until June 19, 1865 that the chains were actually unlocked from a quarter million people in the State of Texas. For eighteen months, 250,000 people who were legally and deservedly "free," were **burdened again by a yoke of slavery**. Thousands more African Americans in Delaware and Kentucky would not be truly freed for six months beyond that.

It is with something of this same heartache over a devastating WRONG and an aspiration to see God's GOOD WILL take its full effect in all human lives that that the Apostle Paul pens the fifth chapter of his Letter to the Christians of Galatia. The particular WRONG that Paul was so upset about is that though the Galatians have been set FREE by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there are false teachers – Paul calls them **"agitators"** – who have RE-ENSLAVED them to the Jewish Law. Paul has taught them that the sacrifice Jesus made for them on the cross has fully freed them from God's judgment on sin. He's said, in effect: You don't need to go around doing slavish rituals or worrying about whether or not you've been physically circumcised or trying to justify yourself before God and others by compulsively signaling your virtue. That's no way to live! That's like living in chains.

Paul, literally, puts it like this: **<sup>2</sup> Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. <sup>3</sup> Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.** In other words, if you think your obedience to the moral code

will save you, then you'd better do it perfectly. Don't miss a checkbox. But please understand this: You are ignoring the value of what Jesus did for you on the cross.

**<sup>4</sup>You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.** You are putting your hope in your moral performance instead of in God's grace.

**<sup>5</sup>For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.** I'll say more about this in a moment, but the key idea is that the righteousness we seek -- the good standing before God and the capacity to really live better -- doesn't come from our power and performance but from God's. It's faith in Christ, not our religion but our REAL relationship with him that is our hope. **<sup>6</sup>For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.** Christ cares mainly that we love him and seek to love others like he does.

**<sup>7</sup>You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup>That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.** Jesus (who calls you) wouldn't have put the law's chains around your ankles again when he died on the cross so you could run free! Think about this!! If you do, **<sup>10</sup>I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view.**

And then Paul starts to get really intense. The people he loves have been emancipated by the proclamation of none other than Jesus Christ on the cross. But some people are treating them as IF and telling them that they still ARE slaves to the Law instead of free children of Grace. One summer in college I worked for a supervisor who disliked me. As a way of humiliating me, he gave me a one-and-half inch paint brush and told me to paint a huge floor that had already been newly painted. The Big Boss found me and learned who'd ordered this. It did not go well for that supervisor. Paul says: **The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.** In other words, Christ, is not going to be happy with people who try to perpetuate the slave trade in whatever context.

And you know that's not ME, says Paul. I am not a legalist. **<sup>11</sup>Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.** No, I am being persecuted, Paul is saying, because I preach a message that is offensive to some people. I'm saying that you can't save yourself by your good deeds. But the good news is that you don't have to. Just put your faith in Jesus Christ and how he paid fully for all your sins upon the cross. Trust in his grace and goodness, not your own.

And then Paul sort of goes OFF. **<sup>12</sup>As for those agitators,** (those legalists making everyone miserable with their impossible standards and refusal of the gospel of grace) **I wish they would go the whole way (past circumcision) and emasculate themselves!** It's Paul's way of saying: We don't need them reproducing!

Let me pause our playback of this letter and just acknowledge here on Father's Day how grateful I feel that my earthly father did reproduce! I'm grateful for the life he gave me and the long list of ways he has taught me how to make the most of this life. But as I ponder the message of Galatians 5, there is a particularly memorable lesson my father taught me that came to my mind.

I was in the fifth grade. Earlier that day, my friend and I had been caught stealing candy from a local convenience store. I wish I could say that I'd never stolen before. Sadly, however, it had become a rather routine and selfish game to me. Maybe that's how slaveholding once worked for people. I do know that even more than eating the chocolate, I had some taste for the feeling of power that came from just taking something that I wanted for ME. I liked the affirmation my friend gave me for my illicit daring. I especially enjoyed the thrill of getting away with it. Until I didn't get away with it. Until I looked up into the eyes of Mr. Myers (the store owner) who had liked me before and saw his hurt and disappointment. Until I felt what I should have felt all along – SHAME over what really was a basic, bald-faced, SIN.

When picking me up that day, my mom had said, "Go to your room and wait till your father gets home." I agonized all afternoon at the thought of the confrontation to come. That evening, my dad called me into his home office where he sat behind a great big desk. I sat down opposite him in a winged back chair that made me feel very small. "I'm just trying to understand," he began. "Did mom and I not feed you well enough, so that you became very hungry?" "Did we fail you as parents in helping you understand that stealing is wrong?" The questions went on like this, as my dad skillfully helped me look at the absurdity and perversity and stupidity of what I'd done.

I wanted to cry out: *"Please spank me. Ground me! Make me mow lawns all summer to pay off my debt!! Anything but make me face what has gone wrong inside of me, Dad!!!"* And just when I could stand it no longer, my father said: "I'd like you to apologize personally to Mr. Myers tomorrow after school. I want you to know that we've paid him what you owe. You are not being punished. But I trust you won't steal again." And I walked out the door that night a FREE fifth grader – in TWO important ways I invite you to think about, as they may have implications for you too.

When Paul writes at the start of Galatians 5: **<sup>1</sup> It is for freedom that Christ has set us free** there are two senses in which I believe he means that. First of all, when we put our faith in Christ, we obtain freedom FROM what we don't want – which is the judgment our sins deserve. Most of us, I imagine, have no clue what we actually deserve because our sin keeps us from even perceiving in the way God sees it all we've done or not done and what that means to him or others. But, regardless, through the power of Christ's cross, the punishment we deserved has been absorbed by Jesus. The debt we owed for our sins has been fully paid. By his grace and not our works, all of us who put our faith in Him are now forgiven and freed to live our life anew. And that last

part is important because life in Christ isn't just about what we've been freed FROM but what we have been freed FOR – a more righteous life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In simplest terms, I think my dad paid my debt and forgave my sin in the belief that his grace might have an effect on me. And it did. Mr. Myer's candy was safe from then on! I wanted to be a more honest fifth grader not because I thought I could no longer get away with stealing but because I couldn't get away from that experience of my father's grace. It made me truly want to be a better person – to have a generous spirit more like his and a lot less like a candy-stealer.

Whether we are young or older, all of us battle the appetites of our sinful nature – what St. Paul calls "the flesh." Paul says: <sup>19</sup> **The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;** <sup>20</sup> **idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions** <sup>21</sup> **and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.** In other words, a lot of what goes on at fraternities or many reality shows! Some folks call these behaviors "freedom," when they are really a form of slavery. Our passions come to own us.

Chuck Colson, the former White House staffer and founder of Prison Fellowship once observed: *"Americans have achieved what modernism presented as life's great shining purpose: individual autonomy, the right to do what one chooses. Yet this has not produced the promised freedom; instead, it has led to the loss of community and civility, to kids shooting kids in schoolyards, to citizens huddling in gated communities for protection. We have discovered that we cannot live with the chaos that inevitably results from choice divorced from [God]."*

We don't have to just live with the chaos, of course. We can stop putting our faith so much in ourselves and open ourselves more to Christ. Jesus has not only freed us FROM judgment; he has freed us FOR the life of his kingdom -- a better life than we often settle for today – and one that doesn't rely on our strength alone. As you nurture your connection to Christ through practices like Christian worship, prayer, study, service or fellowship – his Spirit begins to fill your life. God starts to replace your mere willpower with his real power. Paul says that it's not hard to recognize when your relationship with Jesus is that REAL. You or others will start to notice that in the place of the passions and desires that used to own you, a different kind of character is growing up. Paul says: <sup>22</sup> **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,** <sup>23</sup> **gentleness and self-control.**

When I think of a father who was said to have been especially full of these qualities, I think of E. Stanley Jones, an American Christian missionary who gave most of his life to serving the Dalit people, the poorest of the poor in India. Over the years, Stanley Jones became a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, a counselor to president Franklin D. Roosevelt, and a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. credited one of

Jones' best-selling books as having inspired him to pursue a philosophy of non-violence in the civil rights movement. If you ever read one of his many books and devotional guides, you'll be struck by how permeated this enormously influential man's writings are with the subject of *surrender*. Let me close with one excerpt.

*"What happens to the self when surrendered to God: Does God wipe it out?" Jones asks. The answer is, NO. "He [merely] wipes it clean of selfishness. The very act of self-surrender gives God the opportunity to cleanse us from selfishness with our consent and cooperation. Having cleansed us of our central selfishness, God gives [your self back to you]. It is a paradox, but you are never so much your own as when you are most his. Bound to him, you walk the earth free. Though at his feet, you stand straight before everything else. You suddenly realize that you have aligned yourself with the creative forces of the universe, so that you are free. Free to create. Free to love. Free to live. Free to live at your maximum... Free to be all he wills you to be."*

**<sup>1</sup> Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves – or anyone else for that matter -- be burdened again by a yoke of slavery...** to the old law, to the sinful self, or to any human being. Surrender only to the power of the Cross and of the Spirit, because it is for freedom FROM judgment and freedom for the wonderful possibilities of God's righteous kingdom that Christ has set you and me truly FREE.

Please pray with me...

*God, our heavenly Father, we thank you again this day for our earthly dads and mentors – and especially those whose witness of grace and truth has helped us to see more clearly and inspired us to seek more nearly the freedom and character of your kingdom. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*