

Freed to do Good

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[0 : 0 0] Tonight, we are coming to the final part of a short study that we've been doing on Paul's letter to the Galatians. The title of our series, as you can see, is Galatians' Freedom, and we've been looking at how that great theme of freedom runs through this letter of Paul.

We've come to the final chapter, and I want us to just read again, verses 11 to 15. See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world, for neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. This theme of freedom in many ways sums up the whole of this letter. If you've never read Galatians before, or if you're maybe just joining us for the series, the basic background to the letter is this.

Paul had come to Galatia and he'd preached the good news of the gospel to the people there and they'd received the message and come to faith in Christ. But after Paul left, other people came in and they started saying to these Galatian Christians, if you really want to be saved, it's not enough to just believe in Jesus. You have to also keep God's law. In fact, you have to actually become like a Jew and in particular, you have to be circumcised. And as we said earlier in the series, it's a bit like Derrick preaching something here in the morning and then me coming along in the evening and saying, well, Derrick was nearly right, but we have to add a few extra requirements to what he said.

That's what happened to Paul. Other people came in behind him and added a whole additional set of requirements to the gospel message. And in this letter, Paul goes absolutely ballistic about this and reading through Galatians, Paul is pounding home the truth that salvation does not depend on the stuff you do. It is only and absolutely only through faith in Jesus Christ. And for Paul, it's not a matter of these Galatians choosing between a theological school or choosing between a different person to admire or a different church or denominational loyalty. It is a choice between the true gospel and a false gospel. It's a matter of life and death. Throughout the letter, Paul repeatedly emphasizes that this whole idea of trying to earn our salvation through obedience to the law is not going to save us. It's only in fact going to imprison us as Christians through faith in Jesus Christ. We are no longer prisoners under the law. We've been set free. And I was trying to think how we could summarize this. And the image I have in my mind is one of, if you imagine a mountain with beautiful green pastures at the top and a steep, rough cliff at the side, and you'll have to forgive me, I'm going to put up some pictures of this so you can see exactly what I mean. So there's the pasture, beautiful lush pasture at the top of a mountain. And down the side of it, you have this steep cliff. The pasture at the top is our salvation in Jesus. The steep cliff down the side is when we're lost in sin. The law is a bit like an electric fence on the edge of the cliff. And so we have these, if you like, different areas for us. We're at the top is where we're safe in Jesus. Down the cliff is where we're lost in sin. And the law is an electric fence perched there on the edge. Trying to earn our salvation through good works is a bit like trying to climb up that cliff. We have to do it by our own efforts and we have to work our way up. But every time we sin, the electric fence gets electrified and it stops us. It prevents us from getting into a right relationship with God because we sin and disobey. If we didn't have any sin, it wouldn't be a problem.

We could climb up no problem. But the fact that we all sin means that that fence is always getting electrified. The law keeps on stopping us. So if you're trying to climb up that cliff, the law is a horrible thing. It's like a catch 22. The harder we try to climb up, the more the fence keeps electrifying and we keep getting forced back down to the bottom. The key point that Paul wants to emphasize is that the message of the gospel is not climb harder. The message of the gospel is stop climbing and let Jesus rescue you. And the promise of the gospel is that Jesus is going to take you all the way to the top, pass the fence into safety where you are free to live a new life of joy and blessing and peace with God. That's the gospel message. But these false teachers who were coming to the Galatians were basically saying to them, you need to go back down that cliff and start climbing again. Paul says, no way to go back down that cliff would be to ruin the freedom and joy and peace that you now have in Jesus. And not only that, it would mean that the people in Galatia who were still to come to faith would be hearing a false gospel if the Christian believers there started to tell them that salvation was through works of the law. The gospel that these Galatians now preach must remain the true gospel. And of course, that's true for us and for every other age of the church as well. And so Paul is saying, as Christians, we're free from the law. But the question immediately arises, well, if we're free from the law, can we just do whatever we like? And Paul's answer to that is no. And there's a key statement about that in chapter five, which was the first verse that John read for us from verse 13. It says, 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. Here you can see that Paul is saying that our freedom is an opportunity. But that opportunity doesn't mean doing whatever you like. It means being free to obey God and be all that he wants us to be. And all of that means that our relationship with the law now changes. If we go back to our picture, the same law that stopped us from climbing up now protects us and it keeps us from falling off that cliff again. It's a great reminder that freedom doesn't mean no law. The word for no law is anarchy. Freedom means living in harmony with the law. And that actually applies in every part of life. It applies in science. I'll spoil my freedom as a human if I ignore the laws of gravity or of healthy eating or of good hygiene. It applies in society. I'll spoil my freedom if I ignore the laws about driving or about paying my taxes or about personal conduct towards other people. And it applies spiritually.

[9 : 23] We will spoil our freedom if we ignore the law that God has given to us as a guide for how we should live. All of that means that as Christians we're not free to do whatever we're like. We're actually free to do something far better. We are free to love one another.

In other words, we are free to do good. All of this teaching comes to a climax in chapter six. And here Paul really gets to the heart of what this whole issue in the Galatian church is all about. Up until this point Paul has been giving us a lot of very important theological teaching. And he's referred back to the Old Testament several times and Galatians is full of incredibly rich theological teaching. But here in this chapter everything becomes really quite really very personal and very practical. Paul is telling us that the truth of the gospel and the freedom that that brings should have a profound effect on the way in which we treat other people. And that whole question of how we treat others lies at the heart of chapter six.

And in this chapter Paul draws a contrast between two massively important types of behavior in humanity. One of these types of behavior is one of the best things that we can do in experience.

The other is one of the worst things that we can do or experience. Paul sets before us two things that will have a massive effect and I'm sure in many ways have had a massive effect on your life.

Paul draws a contrast between using people and serving people. And I want us just to look at these together. For the very last part of this letter Paul takes up the pen himself. Up until this point he would have been dictating to a scribe who would have been writing down the letter for him.

[11 : 47] But as was often the custom for the very last section Paul takes the pen himself to write a final message. And we can see that very clearly because it says in verse 11 see with what large letters I'm writing to you with my own hand. Now that reference to large letters I'm not completely sure what it means. It might mean it might be a reference just to kind of just to poor handwriting which could be related to an eye problem. Most people are generally agreed that it seems as though Paul had had poor eyesight. And if you look back in chapter four of Galatians you can see that there was some ailment that led Paul to come to Galatia in the first place and there's a hint that it was actually an eye problem. So it might have just been bad handwriting. It's probably more likely however that that phrase large letters is more like what we would call block capitals or underlining or writing in bold. He is highlighting something of immense importance. And either way whatever the reasons what he writes here is immensely important because in these verses Paul is getting to the very heart of what of why these false teachers had come to Galatia and were telling them to be circumcised.

If you think about it for these Galatians they could easily have thought that these teachers should come in after Paul. It would have been very easy to think that they'd come to save the day. Paul had come with this great message but he hadn't actually given them enough and so they come in and they're like oh actually we're giving you the whole story and we're telling you the bit that Paul missed out and thankfully we can give you everything that you need. For the Galatian Christians they would have sounded very persuasive, very helpful and they probably came across as very holy. But Paul is saying to these Galatians Christians these false teachers are not helping you.

They are using you. If you look at verse 12 and 13 you can see that the false teachers weren't actually trying to help these Galatians. They were actually trying to help themselves. They wanted to make a good showing in the flesh and the reason they did that was to avoid persecution.

Now at this stage in the early church it's helpful to remember that the primary source of persecution wasn't actually from the Romans, it was from the Jews. Often when we think of the early church we think of persecution coming from the Roman Empire and that did happen but that was really just at the very end of Paul's life that that began in any earnest under the reign of Emperor Nero. At this early stage the persecution of Christians came mostly from the Jews and if you go for example to the first half of Acts 17 you can read all about it. So for these false teachers who in some ways had wanted to kind of align themselves with the Christian faith their insistence on circumcision meant that they could claim to be Christians while at the same time keeping in with the Jews and avoiding difficulty and persecution. And as they sought to do that these Galatians

Christians who were they were forcing to be circumcised would have been a great demonstration of their commitment to the Jewish law. In other words they could say to their opponents look don't pick on us look at how we're getting these these Gentiles in Galatia to keep your law and to be circumcised. That meant that that these Galatians became a kind of badge of honour so that they might boast in the flesh of these new believers. But the whole reason they were doing that was to protect themselves from trouble. That means that that the actions of these false teachers were not acts of kindness they were acts of manipulation. And that's why Paul is telling these Galatians with big letters these false teachers are not helping you they are using you.

[16 : 26] Now all of this is raising a massive issue in life because to be used in any relationship is a horrible thing. It's something that I'm sure that that's that you've experienced in different ways that can happen in so many parts of life and it's awful because it involves a kind of really horrible betrayal of trust. Someone comes to us and asks us to do something and we do it because we think it's the right thing and we trust this person who's in front of us. And then we discover that that their motives were not what we thought they were and we've just been used by them.

It can happen even among children. Someone might say oh give me your toy or give me a shot of that game and I'll be your friend. And in many ways using others is just really another way for another word for bullying and adults do it as well. It can happen at work. Bosses might try to squeeze every drop that they can out of their staff in order to improve their figures or their profits.

Colleagues might dodge work and try to leave stuff for others to do or try to get people to do stuff that will help them and benefit them. And it can happen at church. It's incredibly easy to guilt people into doing stuff that will actually help us more than it helps them.

And to be on the receiving end of that kind of using is absolutely horrible. And there are so many people who have been bruised because of that. But as with all of these things in scripture, as well as recognizing that we've probably all experienced the hurt of being used, we probably also need to ask the question have I ever used others? Have I ever got people to do stuff more because it helps me than because it helps them? And I look at myself and I think the answer to the question have I used others is probably yes. And my prayer is that I'd never do it again.

It's a really easy trap for anyone to fall into. And the more responsibility we have, the more we are in a role of leadership or management in work or church or in any other part of life, the easier it is to do it. Our prayer is that God would keep us from that kind of behavior.

[19 : 30] These false teachers were using the Galatians to protect themselves and to make themselves look good. Paul responds directly to that behavior. And he says ultimately these people who are trying to manipulate others and use them as a kind of badge of honor that they can boast about, ultimately these people who are trying to manipulate others and use them as a kind of badge of honor that they can boast about, ultimately these people are going to have to stand on their own. He says if anyone thinks he's something when he's nothing, he deceives himself, but let each one test his own work, then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor, for each will have to bear his own load. If these false teachers want to claim that the law will save them, if they want to claim that they can climb up to God's standard by themselves, then they will have to stand on their own two feet before God.

They can't claim credit from all the people that they've used and manipulated. And the reason for that is highlighted very powerfully by Paul in verses seven and eight, where he says do not be deceived, God is not mocked for whatever one sows that he'll also reap, for the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the spirit will from the spirit reap eternal life.

Ultimately, using these Galatian Christians to kind of gain some kind of religious credit is not just a case of manipulating them, it's actually trying to manipulate God.

And Paul says do not for one second think that you can do that, because God is not mocked. You can't sow the seeds of manipulation and expect to receive a harvest of righteousness.

And all of it is a brilliant reminder that there's just no nonsense or drivel or bluster with God.

[21 : 59] It's fascinating. That phrase, God is not mocked, that's the kind of phrase that we could actually kind of pluck out of the Bible and use in order to get people to do what we want. So we might say God is not mocked, so you need to do what I say.

And what we're being shown here is that the whole reason Paul uses that phrase is to say God is not mocked, so don't ever use him to manipulate or use other people.

And it's all reminding us that God is just absolutely straight and true. He has no interest in putting on a religious show. He's got no time for manipulative nonsense.

He's got absolutely no patience with trying to show off or boast in front of him. If there's one thing that's true of God, it's that he's true. He is genuine, honest, open, fair, and he is absolutely straight.

He has got no time for users. And that's emphasized by the fact that this whole idea of using other people is the very opposite of the kind of people that God wants us to be.

[23 : 30] Paul's opponents in Galatia were people who were using others to serve themselves. As Christians, we're to be the opposite. We are to use ourselves in order to serve others.

If we go back to the key statement in chapter five, we see that at the heart of our freedom is the fact that it gives us an opportunity to serve people.

You are called to freedom, brothers, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. That of course ties in with the concept of the fruit of the spirit, which comes at the end of chapter five.

One of the key aspects of fruit is that it is for the benefit of others. As Christians, we are free. We are free to do good and at the heart of doing good is loving and serving others.

So that in many ways is Paul's great theme. But coming into chapter six, he gives us three examples of what that looks like in terms of how we can serve other people.

[24 : 47] And it's actually very interesting what he chooses as his three examples. In verse one, he says we must serve the person who has mucked up.

In verse two, he says we're to serve the person who's burdened. And in verse six, we are to serve the person who teaches us. Our freedom in Christ means that we can serve in all of these areas and I want to just look at each one in turn.

Verse one, we are to serve the person who has mucked up. Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

I think that this is one of the most important verses for the Christian church today. And the reason it's one of the most important is because often it can be one of the most ignored and forgotten.

As Christians, what should we do when someone mucks up badly? So if someone's caught in a really bad scandal, what do we do?

[26 : 05] What do we do when we discover that there's some awful sin in someone's life that we didn't know about? What do we do if somebody makes a massive mistake in their Christian walk?

Do we humiliate them? Do we kind of keep them at arm's length? Do we punish them? Do we blog about them? Do we kick them out of our church?

No. We restore them and we do it gently.

In other words, thinking back to our image of the cliff, if someone wonders too close to the edge, too close to the fence, our job is to bring them back and keep them safe.

That will always involve talking to them. As we do so, we would want to warn them about the danger and horribleness of sin. Touching an electric fence is a bad idea and wandering into a path of sin and brokenness is a bad idea.

[27 : 16] We need to carefully and sincerely warn others when they're wandering too close to something. We'd have to, at the same time, make sure that we constantly assured them of our commitment to support and help them.

Above all, we want to point them back to Jesus, reminding them that they are rooted and living in him.

And of course, as Paul says, while we do that, we need to keep watching ourselves because it could just as easily be us.

It's so important that we never, ever forget that sin and people are different things.

They are separate, and if sin has found its way into someone's life and caused havoc, whether that's through immorality or addiction or hostility, we must never, ever think that the way to get rid of the disease is to get rid of the patient.

[28 : 24] The way to address the situation is to get rid of the disease, but to gently care for the patient and nurse them and protect them until they're restored.

Sin is something that we want to keep as far away as possible because it's horrible and damaging and brutal. But sinners are people that we want to hold as close as we possibly can, and we want to always protect them.

Our freedom doesn't mean that we can kind of look down our noses at people who have mucked up and think, oh, we're better than them.

Our freedom means that we are to serve them by helping to gently restore them. Verse two, we're told to serve the person who is burdened.

One of the brilliant things about church is that it brings together people from a whole host of different circumstances and backgrounds. So people who would probably not in any way come across each other in life are brought together and they discover that we actually have many wonderful things in common.

[29 : 46] So we all love Jesus. We all love the Bible. We all want to grow in our faith. We all want to reach out to the world around us, and we all carry burdens.

It's so easy to think that everyone else is doing great and that I'm a complete failure because I'm struggling. And there can be a huge pressure to give the impression that we're getting on fine and that we're doing great with work and studies and family and our spiritual lives.

But all that's just another example of the kind of false nonsense that God has no interest in. God knows that for every single one of us, we have burdens that are weighing us down.

And that's why the church is to be a place where burdens are shared. And that can be done in loads of different ways. It can be through just listening to one another, giving someone a listening ear.

It can be through practical help, a word of encouragement, face to face or in a text or whatever it may be. It can be a commitment to pray for one another. It can be just by being a constant, steady, faithful friend to someone.

[31 : 08] It can be through keeping in touch, giving support to someone who's struggling, meeting up one to one or maybe in twos and threes. In every possible way, we should always be seeking to give each other a hand.

Jesus gave that amazing promise where he says, Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, everyone who's burdened, come to me and I'll give you rest. I think one of the ways in which Jesus keeps that promise to give us rest is to provide us with brothers and sisters around us who can help carry our load and stand alongside us.

Our freedom as Christians doesn't mean that we're never going to be burdened. There are many things that are tough as we walk through this life. Our freedom doesn't mean that it's always going to be easy.

Our freedom does mean that we're able to serve each other by sharing the load. And then we have verse six where we're told, Let the one who's taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.

And this verse kind of seems a wee bit surprising. It almost seems out of place. Why would Paul kind of throw in this sentence about having, sharing good things with the one who teaches you?

[32 : 32] Well, if you think about it, this is actually an immensely important verse for the Galatian church to hear. As we've been saying, they've been on the receiving end of manipulation from false teachers.

In that kind of situation, when somebody mistreats you, it would be very easy for them to think, We are never going to listen to anyone ever again. Paul is reminding them that that's not the answer.

Instead, they are to maintain good relations with the rest of the church and with those who will teach them the truth. And it's important for us to think about this because we can very easily make the very same mistake.

We can have a bad experience of something and as a result, we just write it off completely. And that's especially true in the church. I have met many people who've had a bad experience in church and they've written the whole thing off as a result.

Paul is reminding us that that is not the answer. If we respond to bad teaching by refusing to ever be taught again, we're just making a bad situation even worse.

[33 : 54] It's like being ill and going to a bad doctor and then saying, Well, I'm never going to get any more medical care ever again. Paul is reminding the Galatians that they must stop listening to this false teaching, but they also must keep listening to true teaching.

And that brings us back to what we said at the very start. The difference between true and false teaching is not a matter of different opinions or different understandings. It is a matter of life and death.

Our freedom doesn't mean that we don't need anyone to teach us and that we can think what we like. Our freedom means that we are able to learn the truth together. As Jesus himself says, as we read at the very start of the service, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth.

And the truth will set you free. So in this chapter, Paul is drawing a really important contrast between using people and serving people.

And he's saying that the people who are using others are the ones who are condemned. The people who are serving others are the ones who are truly free.

[35 : 23] And as we said, it's a very practical chapter and there's some really helpful and important things that we must all try and remember.

But as we finish, I just want to close by highlighting two theological points. The first is to say, if you've been badly used, if you've been on the receiving end of that kind of manipulation in whatever circumstance it may be, if you've been on the receiving end of that awful behavior that these Galatians were subject to, the one thing I want you to know is that no matter how much other people may use or manipulate you, God never will.

God will never do that. People will, and so much of the world's behavior, including its religious behavior, is stained by manipulation. Galatia is not the only church where people have been used.

It's happened again and again and again and it's horrendous. We've probably all experienced it in one way or another, but please remember that even though people do that, God never will.

God is not a user. In God's eyes, you are not some commodity to be used.

[37 : 07] In God's eyes, you are a precious, beloved child who needs to be set free. And God's great goal is to bring you home to be with Him in His new creation, where all the horrible manipulation of the world will be gone forever.

And we will have amazing freedom to be everything that God created us to be. And the reason we know that is because of the second thing I want us to notice.

God is calling us away from the slavery of using others in order to serve ourselves. And instead, He's calling us to the freedom of using ourselves to serve others.

And the reason He can call us to do that is because that is exactly what He has done for us. And that brings us back to the statement that Paul writes with his own hands.

He speaks about what these false teachers are doing, how they're abusing the Galatians just to make a good showing in their flesh and so that they can avoid persecution.

[38 : 28] And as they do that, they're hypocrites because even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they're just doing it to make a boast in the flesh. And then Paul says, Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's boast was not in himself and it was not in what he made other people do. His boast was in nothing except the cross of Jesus Christ. And on the cross we see the greatest act of serving love that the world has ever seen.

Because on the cross Jesus was used. He was scorned. He was mocked. He was manipulated. He was abused. He was crucified.

And the reason He did it was so that He could restore the people who have mocked up. He did it to give peace and rest for all people who are crushed by burdens.

He did it to show us the truth and to give us the teaching that will transform the world. On the cross Jesus used himself to serve others.

[39 : 47] He used himself to save you. He did it all to set you free.

And now Jesus is calling us away from a life of slavery where people are used and manipulated. And He's calling us to follow Him into a life where we are free to be like Him.

Where we are free to do good. And I hope and pray that every one of us when we hear that call from Jesus, I hope our only answer is yes.

Let's pray. Father we thank you so much for the freedom that you give us in Jesus.

And we pray that in every way possible we would use that freedom as an opportunity to serve others. Help us to always restore those who've made mistakes and to do so with gentleness.

[40 : 56] Help us always to share the burdens that we all carry and to bear one another's burdens in every way that we can. And help us always Lord to maintain and to be carefully listening to your teaching.

To maintain a good relationship with one another in the church as we learn more about your truth. About the truth that sets us free. Thank you so much for your goodness.

We pray O God that your blessing will be upon us all. In Jesus name, Amen.