

Freed to Love

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[0 : 0 0] Galatians 5 and verses 1 to 15. You may not have sensed it during the reading, but it is an absolutely seismic chapter or passage-ness. It's almost like Paul is dealing with splitting the atom, splitting the spiritual atom, as it were. He gets to the very core, the very heart of believing and living as Christians and is defending it to absolutely His life.

It's so important to Him, and you'll see that in the language that He uses as we go through it. It's not just an incidental matter He's dealing with, it's something of great significance in this young, fledgling church, and He wants to nail it, and He wants to remind them of how important Jesus is and the gospel is at this stage in their lives. And I'm going to start by just taking the two major principles that underlie this section and talking about them briefly first before looking at the actual situation, which I'm just going to briefly mention. Because it's so important to recognize the principles here are principles that apply absolutely to today and to your Christian life and to my Christian life. The two things are, verses 1 to 12, He's basically dealing with the idea that rules for many people appear easier than relationship, in spiritual terms, that rules appear easier than relationship.

And then in verses 13 to 15 as He's working it out, He's talking about that sinning appears easier than serving. So as these two things that apply very much to ourselves, you might not get the context and the circumcision and all that stuff, but you get these principles, don't you, that rules appear easier than relationship and that sinning appears easier than serving.

Because there's that reality deep within each of us that we want things black and white, we want things absolutely clean cut, we want a relationship with God and a relationship with other people to be clean cut and absolute, because relationships with others just seem with God and with others just seem so messy and they seem so complicated. So we'd much rather if it just came to church and you told me what to do and told me what I had to do, then I could judge myself and I could judge other people by these standards and it would be much easier. All that stuff about joy and patience and gentleness, it's so unspecific, it's so nebulous, it's so imprecise, just give me some rules to follow and that's much easier.

Much easier isn't it than the mess of relationships. And part of the reason that that's the case is because deep down when we have rules to follow or to break, it means we can be, it's much easier to be in control and it's much easier to seem like we can earn some favour with God if we're obeying the rules. We are hardwired at the very deepest level, we're hardwired, just you think about this, we're hardwired to reject anything good that we don't earn. Deep down we need to earn goodness that's given to us. We constantly are asking about whether we're good enough, whether we're doing enough, whether we're loved enough, what more can we do? We're always deep down trying to justify ourselves, we do it all the time, all the time. You just think about yourself in a new situation, a new job or a new community or a different church, a new situation, what am I going to do with a question subconsciously, maybe I ask you, what am I going to do to be accepted? How can I be accepted? What will I do? How can I act in such a way that will make me accepted? We work to be popular, we want to be liked, we want to be loved, we want to be accepted, and we want to know the rules of the game that will enable us to be accepted. And we can bring that very easily and quickly into our Christian lives. It's so hard for us to accept grace and to accept something that we haven't earned, something that we don't deserve. It goes against every ounce of our innate being from within us. So rules are easier than relationship because they help us to feel that we're earning some kind of favor with God or with one another. And also I think sinning appears easier than serving, doesn't it? Because when we're sinning, we're kind of fitting in with the majority, and it appeals to the natural desires, the selfish desires we have within us. It can be very satisfying, we can focus on ourselves. And there's much less stress, isn't there? We're avoiding a spiritual battle. We're avoiding the eye of God and the disapproval of others, and we can just close the Bible and stop praying and stop serving and just live for ourselves. It appears much easier, especially the whole concept that the Bible seems to always be driving about serving, serving others. But Christians are so hard work. It's much easier to just sit back and find fault with them and there's plenty to find fault with.

[5 : 59] And that makes me feel better about myself. The church is so demanding and it doesn't understand. It's a failed institution. The walk of Christ, the walk of faith, even with Christ is demanding. I can't cope with the battle. It's much easier to give in. And in reality, that's the two issues that Paul is dealing with in this church in Galatia, in a specific context that doesn't mean a great deal to us at its fundamental level. But you'll have seen from the other sermons that Paul was dealing with an issue of adding to the gospel. And it was adding to the gospel with works of the law, so that you were saved by Jesus but you also had to obey the law. Particularly, it was speaking about the need for circumcision and all that went with that in terms of the law. And so these false teachers were coming in and they were saying, you need to obey the Old Testament and trust Jesus. Jesus isn't enough on his own. You need these rules. You need these regulations. You need these things in black and white. And once you tick all them, then you can have Jesus as well. Christ and faith in Christ wasn't enough. You needed the rules. You needed the regulations. You needed the things that were black and white, in this case circumcision. But the result of that was that they weren't loving one another. They were divided. They were treating one another sinfully. And Paul talks about that. You're evoking, sorry, you're abiding and devouring one another and you will consume one another because there was factions. We know about that. Well, some of us know about that. We've been a bit longer in the tooth and others in the church. Divisions, different theological positions that didn't bring people together but dragged them powerfully apart. And because they had these wrong gospel understandings and were adding to Christ in Galatia, then they were divided and being loveless. Well, how does Paul respond to this major issue within the church in Galatia? Well, under the inspiration of God, he responds with urgent passion. That's what he responds with. He responds very powerfully with blunt and brutal language because he sees that the very heart of the gospel is at stake. It's not just a minor fracas. It's not just a difference of opinion. The very, the heart of the gospel, the person of Christ and the truth. And your understanding and my understanding of what it means to be a Christian is subsumed within this whole understanding that Paul deals with. Think, look at the imagery that he uses in this particular section. He talks about knowing Christ being freedom and anything else is slavery. He says you stand up tall. You're standing upright when you're following Jesus

Christ. You're not weighed down. He says you're going back to imprisonment, submitting to darkness if you move away from the gospel. Severed from Christ, from Christ is the life.

Now recently someone that I know was shaving and they were shaving, listening to their phone with earphones on as they were shaving. And they severed the wire as they were shaving, which meant of course that it was useless, the earphone. Severed, completely useless.

And that's exactly the picture that Paul is using here. You're being severed from Jesus Christ. You're being cut off from Jesus. What's left is completely rendered useless.

Then he goes on to say you're falling off a cliff. You're falling away from Jesus Christ. He uses this strong language in these different verses. And he then says it's like falling off a cliff. It's almost suicidal, he's saying. And he talks about the race. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This race of your life, someone significant cut in in front of you and tripped you up and stopped you finishing in this incredibly significant race, a malevolent influence of others. And he uses the whole idea of yeast in dough, which means that it was going to affect everyone else negatively. Then he uses castration. It's getting stronger and stronger all the way through. He says to the people that have done that, he said, I wish I'd go the whole hog. Not just circumcision but castration.

[11 : 13] It's so significant that it will involve disempowering. It will involve fruitlessness and death and the end of anything significant and life-giving. So it's very powerful, very brutal, very strong language that he uses as he goes on to explain why Jesus is... cannot be Jesus plus and it cannot be loveless Christianity. So he does two things. He stresses the crucial truth of God's grace in verses 1 to 12. Now Alistair was preaching about grace this morning and I don't intend to say much more. I know he'll have explained it powerfully and clearly.

But here Paul is, again, it's great that it's dovetailing because he's saying that God's grace is absolutely all we need. It's not Christ plus. So you know he's saying if you're trying verse 4, you know, it's a very strong verse, he says, you're severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law. You've fallen away from grace. If you're... if we're trying to earn God's favour by our works, then we're alienated, severed, fallen away from grace. It's all about grace. It's the simplest truth, isn't it? Grace, mercy, that as undeserved people we get what we don't deserve and we get what we don't deserve and we forget, I can't remember the other side of that. But it's the simplest truth, it's so simple I can't get it. It's hard to accept mercy. Mercy's the hardest thing. It's getting something for nothing. It's reminding ourselves we can't do anything to earn our favour with

God and heaven. Nothing. There's nothing that we can do to earn our place in God's kingdom. He loves you as a Christian tonight because He loves you. He's chosen you because you're chosen. We are saved because of what Jesus earned for us on His death and resurrection 2,000 years ago. There's no greater love than that. There's no greater gift than that.

I've got nothing that I can compare it to. It is a free gift of His grace. He's taken our sin. He's dealt with it. It's punished. It's finished. We are free. And the freedom that's been spoken of here is a freedom of conscience, that we are not guilty anymore before God. We are innocent before God as believers. That's why we are free. And He will always love us. He will never leave us. And there's nothing that we can do, nothing that we can do that can add to what He has done on our behalf. We have simply to accept that.

And Paul so powerfully speaks about that. He says that there's absolutely nothing else for us. For in Christ Jesus, verse 6, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but it counts for nothing except faith working through love. And nothing, in other words, he says, nothing is any power. There's no power. There's no gospel power unless it's faith working through love, unless we accept what Jesus has done for us. And that our faith is in what Jesus Christ has gifted to us. And we build that relationship of trust with Him, listening to Him, going to Him, talking to Him, trusting in His promises, believing what He says. We don't need to do anything to be accepted by Jesus Christ.

[15 : 00] He's done it all on our behalf. And He says to us this evening, like the prodigal Father with His arms open wide, I love you. I've already done it for you. You are free. Your conscience is being dealt with. You are innocent because Jesus Christ has paid the price for your sins, and He has taken your guilt. Because Jesus says, if that's not the case, Christ is of no value. He's of no value to us. So we've fallen from grace, in other words, and Christ is worthless to us. We've returned to slavery. We're out of the race. It's the only foundation. And we've been rescued from that whole way, and it's very hard. It's part of what the battle is that we always have right through our lives. But we've been freed from that whole way of living where we wake up in the morning and say, if I do this and

I do that for God, He'll love me more. If I read my Bible today, then He'll accept me. If I pray, then I'll be clean. And if I try harder, He'll love me more. And that is the antithesis of the gospel, because the gospel says, no, grace is His gift. We can't do anything to be made more loved or more righteous or closer to God legislatively, legally, before the throne of heaven, because it's all been done for us. But when we understand that, then we understand verses 13 to 15, because there's the link word there, isn't there?

Where you were called to freedom, and that links us to the earlier part. And He therefore goes on and says, only use your freedom as an opportunity, not for the flesh, but through love to serve one another. For the whole, the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbour as yourself, but you bite and devour one another. Therefore, we've got this truth that we recognize the crucial centrality of grace and the way of living grace. Therefore, as we understand that, it's only then can we serve others in love as we love ourselves. Recognize that you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

I'm going to define the terms here briefly. We can only serve others in love when we love ourselves, and when we understand the gospel of grace. Now usually when we think of loving ourselves, we think that, well, that's not a very Christian concept, loving ourselves.

It seems a bit selfish putting ourselves first, looking out for number one. That seems to be the way of the world. But it's a Christ-like love of ourselves. In other words, it's only as we understand grace and as we understand the love of Christ for us, can we truly love ourselves in the right way? So that we can say, in other words, I am unworthy, but I'm not worthless. A lot of Christians think they're worthless. That's not biblical, it's not right. You're not a worm. We are unworthy, but we are not worthless. We love ourselves because Christ loves us. We love ourselves because we are made and redeemed in God's image. Grace has rescued me to be a child of the Father, to have, to belong, to be in His home, and therefore we can love ourselves in a different way. It sees myself differently, and it sees God differently, and then it will see others differently because we have that sense of self-love that comes from understanding grace. And that self-love enables us to accept who we are without constantly seeking God or other people's approval, and it helps us to live without hypocrisy. So as we love ourselves with a Christ-like love, then we are also able to serve with a Christ-like service. We are to be those who love one another and through love serve one another. See, very often our service, Christian service, is a work we do to impress. We do it to impress ourselves. We do it to impress the minister.

[20 : 04] We do it to impress other people in the church. We do it to find favor with God, or as probably more importantly as a religious chore or a duty. But Christ-like serving is different because we've begun to see others and ourselves as Christ sees us. There's a joy in our rescue and a wholeness in our love that can put other people first in a beautiful way. But there's a great battle for us to overcome in so doing because we so often find ourselves being sinfully self-indulgent and judging others and being divisive and wanting the praise of people and serving with a grimace. Because we have... it's difficult for us to understand grace and Christ. So we can only truly love ourselves and we can only truly serve others in the church when we understand grace. And Paul sees that as utterly and completely crucial to the health and well-being of the church. So much so that he says without that we have...

we're severed from Christ. We've fallen off the edge of the cliff. And therefore I want to finish just by posing a couple of questions for you to consider as you sit at the Lord's table. And the first is, as a Christian, are you standing firm? You see, for freedom, verse 1, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore. It could be translated stand upright, not bowed over and burdened. Don't submit again to a yoke of slavery. Are you standing straight with confidence, spiritually visualizing it in your relationship with Jesus and His saving grace? That's why communion is about the death and the hope that resurrection of Jesus brings for us until He returns. It's because the crucifixion speaks of God's grace and of Christ's sufficiency. And when Jesus of the cross said, it's finished, He wasn't just talking about

Himself being done. He was speaking about His work of salvation. It's done. He's faced the darkness, the wrath, the hell that is due to all of us. And it's complete. And He gifts us life. And He gifts us His grace and His forgiveness. Because if you're not standing firm in Jesus Christ, that you're falling off a cliff. And Christ is of no value. Christ is of no value to you. He kind of speaks in these terms that Christ is of no value when we have fallen away from Him. Are you standing firm? And if you're not a Christian this evening, then I can only assume that Christ is actually isn't of any value to you. And I want to challenge you with that because that's hugely significant. And if you're spending your life as a Christian waking up and saying, I wonder if Christ will accept me this morning. I wonder how I can obey Him better to gain more favour from Him. I wonder how I can impress Him. I wonder I had better do more things and different things. Then can I ask you just to meditate? And I have to do it absolutely, crucially, all the time. Because there's that reality within my soul and it will be within yours that we can't, we don't get anything for nothing.

And we can't accept something that we haven't earned ourselves or added to to make it important. Meditate on the supremacy and the finished work of Christ that we're asked to accept by faith working itself through love. So are you standing firm and then do I truly love myself as Christ loves me? I think that's a very important question. I think it's a very important question for us all because I think part of loving yourself means that you're willing to be loved by others. It means within the kingdom of God and within the community of believers, you're willing to be helped, you're willing to rest, you're willing to have others carry your burden, you're willing to step back, you're willing to accept who you are as you are in Christ and that you don't wish you were someone else because Christ doesn't wish that for you. And there's a huge amount of identity crisis among Christians.

A huge amount of lack of self-confidence in a godly self-confidence and a wishing we were somewhere else or was somebody else and we don't truly love ourselves in Christ. But it's a hugely significant reality because it's a place of peace and it's a place of recognition that God has gifted us to be who we are by His grace and to progress through that. And then do I love myself so that I can love others well? Love others well. And that's a huge, again, a massive challenge for us. Not hating people, not fighting with them, not being bitter or jealous. Within the church context, not biting and destroying, but loving because it's of the essence of the gospel. It's not the icing on the cake, it's the essence of the gospel. It's the essence of what we believe that we are to love others well because that is how Paul finishes his statement. He reminds us that the whole law is fulfilled in this one word, this one statement, you shall love your neighbor as yourself because that subsumes the knowledge of loving God, it subsumes the first table of the law and therefore the outworking of our love for God is loving one another as we love ourselves.

[27 : 06] So our services becomes and ought to be a gift, not a grind, and it is freedom for us. And I think therefore the Christian community is a unique community of people and we are called to be very different from any other community in this universe because we can love ourselves and have a right opinion of ourselves in Christ and we can rest and we can be looked after and we can look after and we can serve and we can be served and we can love because we are loved. We are able to love others well and that is the only thing that counts. So if I repeat that, in the 19 years that I've been here, it's because I forget it so easily and it's easy to try and move beyond that, he's always on about that.

Without it you're alienated from Jesus, you're falling off a cliff, severed, there's nothing, there's nothing there, he's fulfilled the law for us, we can't add anything to it and unless we recognize that we'll never be able to love others as we love ourselves because of what Christ has done for us. So please meditate on these things as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Amen.

Okay, so in just a moment we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper and before we do so, I'll explain a little bit of what we do and also welcome a new member to us. We, a number of times a year, we welcome new members into the congregation, either at transfer from other places or by profession of faith and we ask them a couple of questions which just help to explain a little bit about what membership is about and the biblical principle, the outworking of biblical principles of being a people together with leaders appointed to be under shepherds to care for, to encourage, to love, to pray, to serve, to be honest and to disciple the community. And so this evening we're welcoming Ken Dawson who is with us for a period of time. Ken is a retired surgeon from North of Sydney. He's decided to use some of his retirement time to study a ETS as you do in your retirement. And we're delighted to have

Ken worshiping with us and among us and hope that we welcome him into our homes and into our hearts as he is away from his own home and from his wife who he doesn't get to see at term times and we remember him during that time. So Ken is here somewhere, I think. Ken, you're there. Ken, I'm just going to ask you these questions which you can stand because then people will see you and know you then to welcome you next time. We've got four questions that just highlight membership and then I've got a question that the congregation respond to as well in recognition. So Ken, you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the only Savior of sinners in whom you have put your personal hope and trust as a sinner, ooh, needing grace, forgiveness, spirit, life and light? Do you resolve in prayerful reliance on the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to live as a disciple of

Christ? Do you promise to support this church, family and its worship and work with your gifts and graces to the best of your ability? And do you submit yourself to the pastoral care, teaching and discipline of the spiritual leaders of the church, seek its peace and prosperity as we promise to love and care for you? Thanks, Ken. And the congregation, do you promise to pray for Ken? Welcome him warmly, love him as part of this church family and together help him grow in grace as we all seek to do ourselves. We do. Okay, thanks, Ken. I'm going to pray. Lord God, we give thanks for this day. We give thanks for this opportunity to participate in the sacrament. And we thank you for the bread and the wine, symbols of your body and blood, taking us to Calvary Institute and these dark, that dark night before the crucifixion, but given for the church of Christ for all time. So we thank you for the Lord's

[32 : 24] Supper. We thank you for all it reminds us of in its physicality and individuality of it and yet in the corporate nature of doing it together. We thank you for Ken. We pray for him. Bless him in his studies, bless him in his life here in Edinburgh and also remember his wife and family back home in Australia. Bless them as they're apart. Bless them when they're together and we pray for his protection and his growth in grace as we pray for each of us and that we would use this time of communion to consider our growth in grace and our need for constantly finding ourselves at the foot of the cross. So bless as we pray and help us as we come to you with thanksgiving and grace to remember your death. Amen.