

The Gospel of Freedom

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[0 : 00] So we're now going to, for a short time, look at the passage we just read from the Bible, from Paul's letter to the Galatians. So if you have a Bible, you might find it helpful to have it open there.

Galatians chapter 1, if you've got one of these church Bibles, that's on page 972. Further on in the letter, Paul says in chapter 5 and verse 1, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Confirm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. I think a lot of people in our world today see Christianity, see faith as something that's quite heavy, quite burdensome, quite legalistic or oppressive, and at times the church maybe is guilty of these things. Maybe these are things you feel yourself about the Christian faith. The message of Jesus is a message of freedom. Maybe you're here this evening and you've come to church and you're weary, you're burdened by life, maybe you're battling with sin and guilt and shame, maybe you're struggling with the lack of self-worth or inadequacy, maybe your heart is full of anxiety or worry about the week ahead.

There are so many things as human beings that can weigh us down and burden us and make us feel trapped or ensnared. This letter we're looking at this evening, Paul wrote to these early Christians in Galatia and he points us to the liberating power of the gospel and the incredible freedom that Jesus brings to people who trust in him.

[1 : 44] It's a letter which promises us this evening that our standing before God is never dependent on anything except our faith in what Jesus has done. So over the next few weeks we're going to do a short series looking through Galatians.

We're going to do six snapshots into Paul's letter to the Galatians and we're going to be thinking about the theme of freedom as we explore the letter together.

I'll mute myself that time. So we're looking this evening at Galatians and chapter one.

I wonder if you've ever ordered something online and when it's arrived and you've opened it up, you've realized that what you've ordered is actually a counterfeit or a copy or a cheap knockoff of what you wanted.

I once was ordering some headphones on Amazon and I thought I was getting a great deal. I bought them, they arrived and they were a cheap kind of Chinese Apple ripoff and they were useless.

[2 : 43] Or maybe when people used to watch DVDs, maybe you got a copy of a DVD and found out that it was a pirated movie. And when you compare a pirated film with seeing a film in the cinema, it might look similar, might sound similar, it might be presented as the same thing, but it's not the same.

The picture's often a bit blurry, the sound is usually off a fraction. We can usually spot a counterfeit or a knockoff when we compare it with an original.

And Paul begins this letter to the Galatian Christians talking about the gospel because these were Christians who were embracing a counterfeit gospel, a fake gospel.

And so the first point I want to think about this evening is that the gospel is unique. Look at verse six. Paul says there, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and you're turning to a different gospel.

Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. One of the surprising things about this letter when you compare it with maybe the other New Testament letters is Paul's tone.

[3 : 54] It seems quite intense, quite angry. Normally his letters start with, I rejoiced over you with thanksgiving. He's usually quite encouraging in the start of his letters.

But right at the beginning of this one, he says, I am astonished. I am shocked by what I have heard. Further on in the letter, he says, you foolish Galatians.

So what's the problem going on in Galatia? Well, there was a group of teachers who were teaching that the Gentile Christians, the converts, people who were not Jewish, who had become Christians, in order for them to be fully accepted and right before God, they had to not only put their faith and their trust in Jesus, but they also had to embrace the Jewish cultural customs of the law.

In other words, they had to be circumcised. They had to follow all the food laws and all the other ceremonial stuff that God's people had to follow in the Old Testament.

But why is it such a big deal? Why does Paul get so worked up about this? Is this not just a cultural thing that people can agree to disagree on? We live in a world that's full of different messages, different values, different influencers.

[5 : 11] And the culture around us would say to each their own, we would agree to disagree. And in the church, there are some areas where we can agree to disagree, maybe in terms of what we wear, what time we have our service, the style of worship.

But Paul is saying when it comes to the gospel, when it comes to the essentials, there is no room for compromise. If we are wrong on the gospel, we are wrong everywhere.

And he's saying that the gospel these early Christians were embracing isn't really a gospel at all. So the stakes could not be higher. Paul says that in verse 6 and 7, that they are deserting Jesus.

The stakes could not be higher. This is why Jesus himself, when you read the gospels, is particularly hard against false teachers. He's particularly harsh against the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who are leading people astray.

Matthew chapter 7 verse 15, he says, watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

[6 : 21] So this is the problem in Galatia. There's this false teaching which is leading people astray. So you can understand Paul's anger. It's the kind of anger a parent might feel if they see their child being led down a dangerous path.

He's concerned for these Christians, but at the same time he's condemning these false teachers because what they're teaching is not the gospel. There is no other gospel, Paul's saying.

If you add anything to Jesus, it is effectively a different gospel. And we face similar problems today in our own lives. There's maybe two extremes we gravitate to.

On one hand you have legalism. Legalism says that in order for God to accept you, you need Jesus, but you need Jesus plus. In practice you also need to be like this.

You need to do this. You need to earn favor with God. And that can express itself in different ways. We might gravitate more towards saying, I'm not good enough to be a Christian.

[7 : 28] But that too in its own way is distorting the gospel. We also might face the temptation to make secondary issues into gospel issues.

We might make the kind of culture, the church culture, the style of worship, the clothes we wear when we preach the order of service. All of these things are secondary issues. On the other hand, the opposite danger to legalism is the approach which says, well, we're saved by grace.

Jesus has saved us so we can really do whatever we want. In the name of Christian liberty we are free to do anything. And as the letter goes on, we'll see that that's absolutely not the case.

Paul says Jesus frees us. The gospel is a message of freedom, but it's freedom to a new kind of life, a life that is fruitful, a life that's distinctive, a life that's marked and shaped and identified by love.

So the gospel is sometimes distorted by these two extremes, but for us the danger might be somewhere more in the middle. I think usually it's more subtle.

[8 : 34] Sometimes you might think cognitively, I've got the right gospel. I know what Jesus did. I know the facts of the gospel inside out. But when it comes to our practical, everyday experience as Christians, sometimes we burden ourselves, we preach a subtly different gospel to ourselves.

And I think one of the areas we see that most clearly is how we respond to sin, how we respond to our own brokenness and failure. So often we put ourselves through cycles of guilt and shame and hopelessness.

We tell ourselves, I just need to try harder. I need to be better. I need to do more. The gospel tells us first and foremost to look at what Jesus has done, to look at what He has done for you on your behalf, to secure your forgiveness, to remove your guilt, to deal with your shame, to give you hope

of a new life, to give you freedom from the burden of slavery.

So a different gospel can be subtle. And the alternative gospel that's been preached in Galatia probably wouldn't have struck the Christians there as radically different. Because when we're thinking about counterfeit products, the differences are usually fairly subtle.

You know, when you look at online, the picture might be the exact same. It might be presented in the same way as the original. The name might be subtly different. And in much the same way, the Galatians were not led astray by a radically different message.

[10:05] It was the message of Jesus, but subtly changed. It was added to. It was a message of salvation by faith in Jesus plus. So that's the first thing this evening.

The gospel is unique. Secondly, I want to think about the fact that the gospel is true. And that might seem obvious to us this evening if we're Christians.

But we live in a time and a culture where truth is relative. Every opinion, every belief, every system of thinking is held to be equally valid.

So how do we measure what's true? How do we know that the gospel that we preach here at St. Columbus is the true exclusive gospel? Well, first of all, it's not based on personal feelings or convictions.

God does work through that. But ultimately, we have to measure truth against His word, against the Bible. Nor is it necessarily what our church leaders tell us. Obviously, God uses our leaders in preaching and proclamation and speaks through them.

[11:09] The infallible source of truth is what God has said in His word, through His chosen people, His apostles. And that's ultimately what Paul goes on to say.

Because the question arises in Galatians 1, well, who is Paul to say that his gospel is any better than this gospel? And this is what leads him on now to go on to say that his message is not man's gospel, verse 11, for I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

I did not receive it from any human being, nor was I taught it, but I received it through revelation from Jesus Christ. He says in verse 1 as well, he identifies himself as an apostle, not from men or through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

So Paul's apostolic identity is really important. And it's what he goes on to speak about for the next chapter and a half. And as we're thinking a little bit about what an apostle actually is, the word itself means someone who is sent, someone who is commissioned, someone who is given a task as a messenger.

In the ancient world, an apostle was a title used for people who would speak in Caesar's name. And if you didn't listen to an apostle of Caesar, you didn't obey an apostle of Caesar, you were effectively disobeying Caesar himself.

[12:32] So an apostle at the time spoke with the voice of the person who sent them. And the New Testament tells us that the Jesus sent out these apostles who functioned in much the same way.

They would speak for Jesus with his words and act with his authority. That's why Paul says here, the gospel I'm telling you about is not man's gospel.

It's not just another take on things. It's not food for thought. This is a message from God. So Paul is saying he's a man who's met with Jesus, who's had direct personal revelation from Jesus.

So either he is a lunatic and he's crazy, or he's a pathological liar and unstable, or he's telling the truth. And when we read Paul's words in his letters, we're reading the very words, the living words of Jesus to us this evening, which are absolutely true for all people at all times.

We'll draw a contrast between what Paul says and what Jesus says. Maybe you've heard people say that. I like Jesus' message. I can get behind the message of Jesus to love people and to be self-sacrificial and be compassionate.

[13:46] But I'm not a fan of Paul. Maybe you've seen those Bibles that put Jesus' spoken words into red text. And it's helpful to a certain extent because it shows us what Jesus was actually recorded as saying.

But it can be unhelpful as well. Because in reality, every word of the Bible is Jesus' words. Paul's words are Jesus' words.

Moses' words are Jesus' words. Every word we have recorded for us is Jesus' voice. So the Gospel is unique. The Gospel is true.

It's the very words of Jesus to us this evening. Thirdly, and finally, the Gospel is liberating. The Gospel presents Jesus as someone who rescues.

Verse 4, verse 3 and 4, Paul opens by speaking about Jesus as the one who gave himself for our sins to deliver, to rescue us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father.

[14:49] So a lot of people think of Jesus as this great teacher, as an inspiring figure, as maybe a model for a good life. Many people today think that Jesus' message is just another iteration of all the other religions around us.

And Jesus was a great teacher, but the Gospel tells us he's far more than that. People are often attracted to Jesus' teaching, but the message that Jesus tells us through Paul and through the rest of the Bible is that we are in desperate need of rescue.

Tim Keller makes this point. He says, imagine that you see a drowning woman. It doesn't help her whatsoever if you throw her a manual on how to swim. You don't throw her some teaching.

You throw her a rope, because that's what she most needs. And the Gospel tells us that Jesus' first and foremost are rescuer, because that's what we most need.

And how does he rescue us? Paul says it there, he gave himself for our sins. Jesus the rescuer is the one who took our place. He is our substitute. And as we think about the problem in Galatia, this message of kind of Jesus plus, it's so helpful to go back to Gospel basics, to think about the fact that Jesus rescues us through no merit of our own, through no help on our part.

[16:11] Martin Luther Key figure in the Protestant Reformation, he said that if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ, you must build your confidence on your own work.

The Gospel tells us to look at Jesus. Gospel is a liberating message, because it tells us it's not about us. It tells us that we are not the hero in salvation.

Jesus is the hero. He's the great rescuer, the one who takes our guilt and our shame and our punishment. When we distort the Gospel and make it burdensome and heavy, it becomes about Jesus plus.

Paul says the Gospel is about Jesus plus nothing. He goes on in chapter two and verse four and five, he speaks about these false brothers who are promoting this other Gospel. He says they slipped in to spy our freedom that we have in Christ, so that they might bring us into slavery.

You have this great contrast between these two Gospels, one of freedom, one of slavery. Jesus gave one message about salvation through his death.

[17:16] He didn't give us helpful ideals on how to live a good moral life. He didn't just inspire us through his life and death to love each other more. He came to rescue us and free us and release us from captivity to sin and death and to give us in its place life and hope and forgiveness.

So our standing before God this evening, something we maybe take for granted sometimes, our favour with God, our acceptance by him is grounded absolutely in the fact that Jesus is the great rescuer.

So he rescues us and frees us. But what does that free life look like? Do we have a licence to live however we please? People go on and later on in the letter to deal with that.

We're told that Jesus doesn't just free us from something, he frees us to something. He frees us to a new kind of life, a life that's marked out by certain qualities.

The first half of the letter, chapter one, chapter two, chapter three, is very much indicative. It's very much Paul saying this is what God has done through Jesus.

[18:23] In the second half he moves on to say this is what this means for you in terms of how you live your life. So there's that kind of balance between the two.

One of the problems we have though, I think as Christians, is that sometimes a performance mindset can be really pervasive in the way we see ourselves and our relationship with God.

Even how we feel about the level of our faith from day to day. Sometimes we can be tempted to think that the strength of our faith is what determines God's favor with us.

But the question should never be how strong is our faith. The most important question is what is our faith placed in? Who is our faith placed in?

Sometimes our faith can feel very weak. Other times our faith can feel strong and vibrant. But the gospel reminds us that God's acceptance of us never changes based on the strength of our faith.

[19:19] What matters is what our faith is placed in, the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. So Galatians is a letter that begins right away with a lot of challenge, a lot of conflict.

It forces us to ask ourselves which gospel do we believe? Which gospel do we live by? Because if we're wrong in the gospel we're wrong everywhere. A deluded and distorted gospel leads to uncertainty.

It leads to a lack of assurance. It leads to a great deal of self-confidence and self-reliance. It turns our attention inwards on ourselves and our own moral spiritual performance.

The true gospel makes us look at Jesus. The true gospel points us to the one who has done it all for us, who has freed us from sin and our guilt and our shame and gives us forgiveness and hope and new life.

The gospel of Jesus is absolutely unique. There is no message in this world like it. The gospel of Jesus is absolutely true. It's a message we can trust.

[20 : 23] And the gospel is liberating. It's a gospel that frees us. Jesus said, come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you so much for the gospel of Jesus Christ. We thank you for your word which has preserved that truth for us.

Father, help us this evening to maybe for the first time place our trust in you and what you've done.

Lord, help us maybe for Christians for a long time to know and to be reminded of what our confidence should be placed in.

Father, thank you so much for the confidence we have through Jesus. Help us to know it. Help us to live it. Help us in the rest of this week to be reminded of your love for us.

Father, we marvel at all you've done for us through Jesus, through his death on the cross, through his resurrection, and the hope that we have through him. Father, we pray that you would, in all that we do in this week, enable us to have our minds fixed firmly on Jesus and be a people who love you and live for you and glorify you in all that we do.

[21 : 35] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.