

GALATIANS 5:1-15

CALLED TO FREEDOM

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

“Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

“For 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 neighbour as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”¹

Freedom is never free. The Declaration of Independence of the United States declares profound truth when it states that certain truths defining man’s condition are self-evident: “all men are created equal” and all men “are endowed with certain unalienable Rights,” including “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” However, not all people are free, for slavery and thralldom have marked humanity since the fall of our first parents. Therefore, wars are fought, and will continue to be fought, to secure freedom for populations and to depose tyrants. Securing political freedom entails great costs; maintaining freedom demands perhaps still greater sacrifice. Living as free people requires the acceptance of immense responsibility.

What is true in the political world is equally true in the religious world. Man is either free, or he is a slave; either he is held in bondage, or he enjoys liberty. The Word of God is unsparing in its declaration that mankind is enslaved. Believers were “once slaves of sin” [ROMANS 6:17, 20], though they are now said to be “slaves of righteousness” [ROMANS 6:18]. People who live in fear of the opinion of others are identified as “slaves of men” [1 CORINTHIANS 7:23]. Tragically, many religious people become slaves to their religion [see 2 CORINTHIANS 11:20]. The Apostle says that those who live by the Law are held captive [see ROMANS 7:6]. Outside of Christ, people are “enslaved to those that by nature are not gods” [GALATIANS 4:8]. We Christians were “once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing out days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” [TITUS 3:3]. There is the very real danger of being snared by the devil—“captured to do his will” [1 TIMOTHY 3:7; 2 TIMOTHY 2:26]. The minds of unbelievers have been blinded by the god of this world [2 CORINTHIANS 4:4]. Thus, “they are darkened in their understanding [and] alienated from the life of God” [EPHESIANS 4:18].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

It would be appropriate to entitle the Letter to the Churches of Galatia as “The Gospel of Liberty.” In this letter, Paul stresses the liberty of the child of God. It is appropriate on this day in which the American states celebrate their independence from the old feudal system of tyranny that we who are Christians should consider the freedom we are given in Christ the Lord. My sincere prayer is that as this message is delivered, those who have yet to discover the freedom we enjoy in Christ will be encouraged to consider the freedom that attends the life that He offers.

Let me say at the outset that the message is not meant to be a political polemic, though it must, of necessity, address the freedom we enjoy as citizens of this great land. Perhaps I should address the subject of licence since it undoubtedly has touched the lives of many of the professed saints of God; and I shall speak of this subject if time permits. My primary concern is to speak to the matter that compelled the Apostle to speak pointedly as he did. The Galatian Christians were being infiltrated by individuals that had the appearance of godly men. However, they were enslaving the saints through restricting the freedom that they had previously enjoyed in Christ the Lord. Tragically, believers in the Risen Son of God are susceptible to voluntarily turning away from the freedom they have known in Christ, embracing chains and bonds even while imagining that they are serving the Son of God.

THE DECLARATION — “For freedom Christ has set us free ... You were called to freedom, brothers.” Freedom is never absolute—there are limits to freedom. Moreover, there are higher authorities to whom we must each give an account for our lives and our conduct. Governments are appointed or elected, or they assume power, and the citizens must obey their rule. Certainly, Christians are to yield allegiance to those whom God has permitted to rule over them. Likewise, each individual must give an accounting to God who gives us life. As the Wise Man has observed, “the spirit returns to God who gave it” [**ECCLESIASTES 12:7b**]. To deny this obvious truth is to declare oneself an anarchist. Social conventions and cultural rules direct our daily conduct. Such conventions and cultural dicta may be contravened, but there are always consequences for any violation of these rules. Just as society and culture dictates how we act, whether right or wrong, there are more fundamental strictures placed on each human being.

Man is inherently free, endowed by certain unalienable rights by the Creator. Unless he has violated the prohibition against depriving another of life, an individual must not be deprived of his own life. Unless she has deprived another individual of possessions rightfully owned, no person should be deprived of liberty to move about. Certainly, an individual should enjoy freedoms such as those enumerated in the American Bill of Rights—freedom of religion and freedom of speech², freedom to defend life and property³, freedom from governmental seizure of property without just compensation⁴, freedom to be secure in person and in property⁵, freedom from capricious prosecution⁶, freedom from aberrant process before the law⁷, freedom from fear of injustice perpetuated by government⁸, freedom from incarceration without lawful process⁹, and freedom from imposition of laws by a legislature that exempts itself from those same laws¹⁰.

² Amendment I

³ Amendment II

⁴ Amendment III

⁵ Amendment IV

⁶ Amendment V

⁷ Amendment VI

⁸ Amendment VII

⁹ Amendment VIII

¹⁰ Amendments IX and X

Living in Canada, we have similar rights and freedoms which have been enumerated in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Among the freedoms enshrined in this document are “freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; freedom of peaceful assembly; and freedom of association.”¹¹ There is a significant difference between the American Declaration of Independence and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Assuredly, the Canadian document reveals the undue influence of lawyers, written as it is in legalese, but it is the appeal to God that distinguishes the two documents. The American document appeals to the Creator and Nature’s God, whereas the Canadian document mentions God only transiently.

While I have no intention of permitting the message to devolve into a political treatise; of necessity I am compelled to point out what should be obvious dangers to freedoms—freedoms which are ours as sentient beings created to know God and to enjoy Him forever. Ultimately, every freedom that we enjoy has its origin in God who gives us life. It is not without reason that the first freedom enumerated by the amendments of the American Constitution is the freedom of religion. By logical extension, trammelling that freedom must lead inevitably to restrictions in freedom of thought and freedom of speech, and impact freedom of association.

Historically, Baptists have proven to be champions of the concept of freedom of religion. A Baptist would rather lose his own religious liberty than to restrict the freedom of another to pursue their faith or their lack of faith according to the dictates of their own heart. Baptists once held convictions; but our Faith has been reduced to a mere religious preference, an homogenisation of contemporary religious expressions casually tossed about in order to create a new religious practise that offends no one and challenges none, and which is indistinguishable from all other religions. Nevertheless, Baptists once understood the tenets of our Faith and boldly championed them to the benefit of all other religions. The Faith held by Baptists was at one time grounded in the revealed will of God as provided in this most Holy Word. That cannot always be said in the modern church context.

It would be impossible in the time allotted to examine in detail the freedom that accrues to the child of God because of his or her relationship to God who is the Author of freedom. However, I daresay that few evangelicals actually realise the freedom we are given in Christ the Lord. Consequently, few of us who know the Lord actually walk in freedom. We permit ourselves to be bound by the expectations of others, or we allow ourselves to be held in check by the threatened censure of some whom we imagine to be better versed in Scripture than we are.

We are ignorant of the Word of God and uncertain what is His will for our lives. Consequently, the lives of Christians are often marked by genuine fear arising out of uncertainty about what the Word of God says. We are more versed in modern cultural norms than we are in biblical tenets. Thus we willingly compromise faith and practise out of a desire to avoid conflict with obstreperous and assertive brothers. We become more focused on securing the approval of mere mortals than we are in seeking the approval of the Living God. For this reason, we frequently fail to serve God with our whole being, content to avoid “rocking the boat” or content to “keep the peace.”

Though we may privately hold that we have freedom in a particular activity, we tend naturally to gravitate to one of two extremes—either we cower at the thought that someone may disapprove of the liberty we enjoy, or we become defiant whenever we imagine that someone inveighs against our freedom. However, we must not depreciate the freedom we have received in the Son of God.

¹¹ Article 2, “Fundamental Freedoms,” Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Because of our fallen natures, it is vital that we be reminded of what the Apostle is not saying. Paul is not saying that we have no responsibility to be obedient to government. We cannot use the freedom we have found in Christ the Lord to justify disobedience to those elected to govern our nation.

Elsewhere, he has instructed believers in their responsibility to government, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed” [ROMANS 13:1-7].

These instructions accord with what is written in another context. [Believers are] “to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” [TITUS 3:1, 2].

The divine instructions Paul delivered anticipate what Peter would write when he warned believing Jews of the Diaspora, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor” [1 PETER 2:13-17].

Neither is the Apostle saying that we can ignore the Law of God and still please Him who gives us life. We are obligated to seek to honour God through our choices and with our words. We are instructed in the Word of God, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” [COLOSSIANS 3:17]. In that same chapter, the Apostle encourages all who believe, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” [COLOSSIANS 3:23]. Believers must always keep in view the fact that they “are serving the Lord Christ” [COLOSSIANS 3:24]. These instructions echo the summary teaching given to Corinthian Christians: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” [1 CORINTHIANS 10:31].

We are also taught in Peter’s first letter, “As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” [1 PETER 1:15, 16].

Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, the brother of our Lord has written, “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” [JAMES 3:13-18].

However, the freedom that is in view in the apostolic statement is freedom to serve God according to the dictates of the heart, freedom from succumbing to the expectations of man in our service before the Lord, and freedom to know God without any requirement for human effort. Freedom in Christ speaks of our relationship to the True and Living God and only secondarily does it speak of our lifestyle. Undoubtedly, freedom in approaching God does affect the way in which we live, but the primary emphasis of Paul's words is on our relationship with the Lord God. We are freely accepted by Christ. We are freely forgiven our sin. We are freely given life in the Beloved Son. We freely approach the throne of grace. We do not depend upon personal merit, social position or cultural standing, to be accepted by the Living God.

THE IMPLICATIONS — “Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves.”

In the text, Paul was speaking particularly about human efforts to make oneself acceptable to God. You must always bear in mind that the life we enjoy in Christ is freely given. This truth is stressed in the teaching provided to the Christians in Rome when he writes, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

“But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” [**ROMANS 5:12-17**].

Human effort in securing the blessing of salvation is negated when we read, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” [**ROMANS 6:23**]. This is a vital point to take home for all who listen. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [**ACTS 4:12**]. God accepts us on the merits of Christ the Lord, and not on any merits we can present through our own efforts. Neither race nor culture, nationality nor political affiliation, denominational affiliation nor church membership, social standing nor economic status, will suffice to compel God to accept you as His child or suffice to secure from Him the forgiveness of sin. Only the sacrifice of Jesus His Son applied to your account will bring forgiveness of sin.

The Christian—and only the Christian—can be truly free. The child of God is permitted to come freely into the presence of the True and Living God. He is not required to bear a gift nor need he be concerned that any gift he should bear will be unacceptable, for he has already been accepted in the Beloved Son. The Christian can speak freely, for he has a relationship to the Father which cannot be severed. He can present his deepest concerns and fears or exult in the goodness of the Father, knowing that he has already been accepted in the Beloved Son. He can serve without fear that his service may be insufficient to please the Living God, for he knows that he performs his labours in the power of the Spirit of God who dwells within. The Christian knows that he is already accepted in the Son of God and that all that he does is presented on the merits of the Risen Son.

Of Christ and our relationship to the Father, we are taught, “Every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” [HEBREWS 10:11-14].

What had happened to the Christians in the Churches of Galatia? Paul attests of them, “You were running well.” However, his astonishment is palpable when he asks these saints, “Who hindered you from obeying the truth” [VERSE 7]? Christians often begin their walk before the Lord well enough; but finishing well demands discipline, a commodity that is somewhat rare in this day. There are multiple enemies of the soul—some that are deliberately set in opposition to the truth and some who are themselves deceived. In the instance of the Galatians, individuals who we identify as Judaizers had been received by the members of the churches.

The message of these Judaizers sounded orthodox. They preached Christ, declaring that He was the Son of God. They preached that He had died a sacrificial death and that He had risen from the dead. They preached that one must believe Him in order to be saved. However, they added one small detail. “If you want to be a *real* follower of the Messiah,” they taught, “you need to be circumcised.”

Well, the message sounded orthodox. After all, Jesus was a Jew and all the Apostles were Jewish. Perhaps they had even heard the saying of Jesus that “Salvation is from the Jews” [see JOHN 4:22]. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to make just a few concessions in order to be certain about salvation and to avoid displeasing God! So, making what seemed to be a little adjustment to their practise as they had been taught by Paul, they began to worship. Yielding on such a small issue seemed to make the religious teachers from Judea happy, and they imagined that they were now fully pleasing to God.

But we never have peace with just a little bit of compromise. Well, the men were circumcised, but the people didn’t keep kosher. These were Galatians who enjoyed eating catfish and smoked eel; they enjoyed a glass of milk with a ham sandwich. This would never do. So another adjustment in the way they lived was necessary. And the teachers noticed that the men and women were seated together at worship. Why, some of the women even prayed aloud! That would have to be addressed. And they insisted on worshipping on the first day of the week. Every *real* follower of the Messiah knew that it was necessary to keep the Sabbath!

Soon, these Christians that had been walking in freedom looked suspiciously like Jews! They were virtually indistinguishable from their teachers that were leading them to be *real* followers of the Messiah. It is at this point that the Apostle was informed of their new devotion to the Law. This information elicited one of the sternest of his letters to be included in the canon of the New Testament.

Paul was compelled by the action of the Galatian Christians to relate how he had confronted Peter because his conduct was dictated by fear of censure from Judaizing Christians. His outrageous behaviour was influencing even Barnabas who had accompanied Paul on his missionary tours. Therefore, in Antioch Paul openly faced down the Big Fisherman, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews” [see **GALATIANS 2:11-14**]?

The unwary sacrifice freedom without even being aware that they have slipped on their chains again. In fact, having been taken captive and entering once more into thralldom, they conduct their liturgies—reciting the old, familiar prayers, singing the same songs they have grown to love, listening to their pastors expound upon familiar passages from the Bible—all the while believing that they are pleasing the Lord God.

The danger of accepting just a little bit of compromise in our freedom before the Lord is that it shortly affects our conduct, robs us of joy in our service, deprives us of peace, and ultimately dishonours the Lord who gives freedom as we concentrate more on making disciples of our religion rather than making disciples of the Master.

So it is that Christians even in this day are susceptible to gravitating to one of two extremes in service to the Master. Believers in the Son of God are prone to slip into a form of spiritual lethargy in which they justify inactivity because they are not under compunction to serve, or they permit themselves to be taken captive by fear and endeavour to do something to make themselves acceptable to God.

Spiritual lassitude can be a form of bondage as there will be no joy in avoiding service to the Master. Indolence in the Christian walk will never permit one to know peace with God as it will sever intimacy with the Father because the believer will not find time to pray or to read the Word. Though the child of God will argue that they are serving God, their service will be mere form, conducted occasionally and without energy. Worship will consist of singing a few songs in a desultory fashion and complaining because they are not fed by the pastor.

Alternatively, Christians may be taken captive by the thought that they must add something to the mercy and grace of Christ. In the Letter to Hebrew Christians we are encouraged to “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” [**HEBREWS 4:16**]. Mercy is when God does not give us what we deserve, and grace is when God does give us what we do not deserve. In Christ we have received mercy and grace. We stand in His mercy and live by His grace. There is nothing that we can add to make ourselves acceptable, nor is there anything that we can do to make ourselves more acceptable in the sight of God.

Nevertheless, even a casual survey of the Christian scene demonstrates the constant attempts by professing children of the True and Living God to make themselves more acceptable. I suppose the most common effort is to create standards of conduct that will make them acceptable in some way. When Lynda and I came to faith, it was in a church that was focused on pleasing God. However, their efforts strayed from endeavouring to worship in spirit and in truth to seeking to please God through external conduct.

The leaders of the congregation were adamantly opposed to mixed bathing—men and women swimming together, though I am still looking for that famed passage that proscribes such behaviour. The pastor under whose ministry I came to faith was removed from the pulpit because with his wife he went into a motel swimming pool at ten p.m. in the evening. And though there were no other guests in the pool, the potential was there that he might be guilty of “mixed bathing.” I never did learn how the elders discovered his indiscretion.

Women could not wear “that which pertaineth unto a man” [see **DEUTERONOMY 22:5, KJV**]. Thus, slacks were verboten. I have known of deacons removed from their position because a wife wore slacks while doing housework in her own home. I vigorously assert that there should be a distinction between men and women, but I’ve never had a problem recognising my wife’s femininity even when she was wearing slacks. And I’ve known a few Scots who wore the kilt; it would not have needlessly precipitated a fight should one have suggested that these men were in some way feminine in their dress.

Christians fight and divide congregations over such weighty issues as whether we should stand or sit when we observe the Lord’s Table, over whether we should use one cup or multiple cups, and over the weighty issue of whether we should use wine or grape juice. Churches have divided over whether they should use an electric piano or a grand piano, or when they should use an organ to accompany congregational singing; and churches have even fought wars over whether accompaniment should be permitted when the people sing praises to the Lord.

Some years ago I was preaching during an extended tour of the southern United States. My itinerary, lasting seven weeks, had brought me to a congregation in McAlister, Oklahoma. The church appeared disheartened, though I couldn’t quite identify the source of disquiet. I had previously ministered at the congregation, and it was obvious that there was a damper on the spiritual tenor of the church. I knew the pastor to be a good man who taught the Word with fervour and passion, and I knew the church had prospered under his service.

Inquiring to discover the reason for the spiritual languor, I was told that the congregation had just completed a weeklong revival meeting the month before I arrived. The evangelist had chosen to speak one evening on the evils of Halloween, excoriating any church that would permit even a party on that evening. It had been the custom of the church to have an outreach programme on Halloween evening at which time children could dress in costume and participate in games. The congregation would ensure that children could receive prizes and that candy would be given out. The evening had resulted in families added to the church during the previous several years, and the people were anticipating the effort again in that present year.

Because of the evangelists’ polemic, the people wondered whether they had dishonoured the Lord during the previous several years. They were confused, and in their confusion they were in disarray. When I learned of the events that had led to this condition I prepared and preached a message reminding them of their freedom in Christ. To be certain, I urged them to avoid sinning against the Living God, but I reminded them that we have liberty in Christ. To permit someone to add to the Gospel by censuring something as innocuous as presenting the Gospel during a costume party violates the freedom we have in Christ.

Indulge me a moment longer on this issue. I briefly pastored a congregation in New Westminster. The church had a rich heritage, having enjoyed the ministry of a powerful preacher of the Word for many years. Unbeknownst to me, however, a powerful clique had arisen within that congregation that had ultimately engineered the ouster of that pastor. He wasn’t strict enough in his ministry, and this coterie of crotchety Christians had worked to bring in a man who would do what they wanted.

The church had practically died, but I went as pastor, believing that God would have me do so, and that I would either revive the congregation or deliver the obituary for it. God blessed and the church immediately began to prosper with additions as people came confessing Christ and seeking to walk in the way of the Lord. Almost immediately we had conflict, however. I suggested that we host a church picnic in a local park on a Sunday afternoon following the services. We could eat and then have games and play softball and rejoice in our fellowship.

The reaction of the deacons was amusing. “Do you mean to have races on a Sunday?” thundered one particularly obtuse soul. “Do you really mean to play softball on a Sunday?” Obviously, that was what I was suggesting. You might have imagined that I was recommending back robbery or committing adultery by the reaction I received. Later I learned that they had taught for years that a Christian could not read the cartoons in the Sunday paper, because that was amusement and thus sinful on a Sunday. They youth had entered their teen years and rejected the faith of their parents because that faith was dead.

The congregation was suffering spiritual atherosclerosis, which matched the physical condition of the congregation. This condition arose from the icily precise conduct of the people that had for some years mined the Word for every imaginable proscription they could create to demonstrate how devoted they were to the Saviour. They seemed genuinely ignorant of the words of the Master, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” [MARK 2:27].

We come to faith, drawn by the Spirit of God. We receive the free gift of life that is offered in Christ the Lord. We believe that He died because of our sin and that He rose to declare us right with the Father. It is all of grace, and we could do nothing to compel God to receive us or to make ourselves acceptable to Him. Then, having come to faith, we imagine that we must do something in order to remain saved, or that we must do something in order to maintain our standing before the Master.

THE APPLICATION — “Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... 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 neighbour as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”

The freedom we have has a theological dimension that must not be neglected. Being free means that we have a relationship with God. We are free from the curse of the law and free of our status as sinners, so that we can now live as free children. Being free is the result of Christ’s sacrifice because of our condition; His death redeemed us from the curse of the law. Now, we are free to enjoy life in the Spirit. This is the import of Paul’s declaration to Roman Christians, “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” [ROMANS 8:2]. I believe you will appreciate what one scholar has said about Christian freedom. “Freedom is not being turned free to be whatever we want (i.e., egocentrism); nor is it some kind of “self-discovery” or “self-authentication” (that, too, is egocentrism); rather, it is being incorporated into the life of God, which he mediates to us through Christ and allows us to enjoy in the Spirit.”¹²

Freedom is the essence of the Christian life. We no longer cringe in fear that we might not have done enough to deserve the grace of God—we haven’t done enough, nor can we do enough. We no longer cast a wary eye heavenward as we worry that God will strike us dead because we somehow displeased Him. Rather, we come boldly before Him knowing that we are accepted in Christ the Lord and knowing that we are loved for Christ’s sake.

If I should make an application for the people of God, it would be simply that which the Apostle himself makes in the verses before us and in those which following. Use your freedom to serve one another. Though we are trained by our culture to gratifying our desires, avoid focusing on gratifying your own desires, focusing rather on how you can build others so that your freedom will be an instrument of righteousness wielded for the good of your fellow worshippers and for the glory of God.

¹² Scot McKnight, **The NIV Application Commentary: Galatians** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1995) 244

Then, as the Apostle states in the verse that follows our text, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” [GALATIANS 5:16]. He concludes the chapter by urging us, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” [GALATIANS 5:25]. We begin in the Spirit, and we cannot be perfected in the flesh [see GALATIANS 3:3].

Of course, all that I have said is dependent upon a relationship with the Father. If you are merely a religious person, you have no freedom. You are lost and under sentence of death. What is vital for you to know is that Christ has provided a way for you to be free. That freedom is offered on the basis of His death by which He received in Himself the punishment you deserved. The Son of God took your sin upon Himself and suffered your punishment so that you do not need to ever face the consequence of your sin—if you accept His sacrifice in your place.

The wonderful news is that Jesus the Master did not stay dead. He conquered death and rose from the tomb. This is the reason our message invites all who will receive it. If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be set free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with the Father, and with the mouth that one confesses and is set at liberty. The Word of God invites all people, saying; “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [see ROMANS 10:9-13].

I pray you will know this freedom; and you can enjoy this freedom when you come to faith in the Living Son of God. Amen.