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Galatians 5:13-15

Gospel Freedom: Not Free to Sin, But Free to Love

A major theme of the book of Galatians has been the *freedom* that the gospel of Jesus Christ: that we are free from the Law and free from works-based righteousness. It's the glorious freedom of knowing that our identity is not based on what we do, but on what Christ has done for us! As we've gone through Galatians, I hope and pray that everyone of us has rejoiced and felt the freedom that the gospel of justification through faith alone brings! But it's possible that some of you have felt uncomfortable as I've preached this message, week after week. Maybe you've thought, "Careful, Logan, or else people will start to think that we don't have to obey, and that it's ok to go on sinning!" If our guilt and shame over sin shouldn't drive us to sin less and obey God more, but just drives us to the freedom of the gospel, then does that mean we should stop worrying about our sin and just give into it? No, it doesn't! So what, then, is the relationship between the freedom of the gospel, sin, and good works of obedience?

Here in our passage, Galatians 5:13-15, Paul begins to answer that very question. Paul has made it very clear we are free from the Law of Moses, that we're free from obeying and keeping the demands of the Law. But now he makes sure that we don't misunderstand him and think that this means we're completely free from God's authority and morality. The freedom of the gospel is not the freedom to sin - instead, it is to be free *from sin*, in order to fulfill the Law of God through loving one another. True freedom in Christ means we are free from the demands of the Law, but also free to *fulfill* what the Law of Moses always pointed to - the Law of Christ. The freedom of the gospel is the freedom to love others just as Christ loves us. That's what we see here in this passage: a picture of true gospel freedom.

So first, Paul begins by reminding us once more that the gospel of Christ calls us to *freedom*.

I. We are Free from the Law in Christ (5:13a)

Throughout our study of Galatians so far, we have seen Paul, over and over again, argue very clearly that to be a Christian is to be set free from the Law. Chapter 2 made very clear that this one true gospel of Jesus Christ is the glorious news of *justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone* - not by our own works or obedience to the Law of Moses. As

we saw in chapter 3, the Law comes and says, “If you want to be vindicated as righteous before God, then you have to perfectly fulfill all of God’s commands.” And that very Law reveals our sinfulness by showing us that *none of us* can fulfill the Law’s demands, *none of us* can be righteous before God and earn life. So it shows us our need for a savior - our need for Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the Law in our place, not only being righteous in our place, but even by *becoming the curse of the Law for us*, bearing the penalty of the Law and the wrath of God we deserve on the cross! Then, in chapter 4, we saw that this means we are *no longer* slaves, but sons! We are no longer slaves to the Law; no longer slaves to impossible demands of works-based righteousness, no longer slaves to the guilt and shame and condemnation it brings when we fail to obey and live up to it all! When we feel the weight of the Law it *crushes us* as an unbearable burden. The Law burdens us with impossible demands; it binds us and chains us up, so that we feel crushed under the weight of God’s holiness and righteousness as we come face to face with our utter sinfulness and failure.

But thank God, you and I aren’t slaves to the Law anymore! Thank God we’re no longer slaves to sin and death! The gospel of Christ has come along and *set us free!* Jesus Christ lived a perfect, righteous life *in your place*, perfectly fulfilling God’s righteous demands, so that you don’t have to! Jesus died on the cross for our sins, bearing the full wrath of God against our sin, bearing the penalty, the death, the curse of the Law that all of us rebellious lawbreakers and spiritual criminals deserve! And Jesus rose from the grave on the third day, defeating sin, Satan and death, even *crushing the power of the Law over us!* And when Jesus did that, He did everything necessary to *break open your chains and liberate you from your slavery to the Law, sin, Satan, and even death!* The glorious good news of the gospel is that righteousness doesn’t come from what you do, but from what Jesus Christ did for you! That we are saved and declared righteous before God not by works, but simply by grace through faith, simply by trusting that Jesus did everything necessary *for us*, in our place!

And this gospel of justification by faith alone, and not by works, is *gloriously freeing!* As chapter 5 began, in verse 1: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!” So here in verse 13, Paul reminds us of this once again: “For you were called to freedom, brothers.” You and I are called to the freedom of knowing that we are forgiven our sins, righteous before God, part of His blessed people, sons of Abraham, adopted into the family of God as God’s sons, heirs of eternal life, united to Christ, filled with

the Holy Spirit, and assured of our salvation - and that this is not based on our works at all, in any way! It's *all based on what Jesus Christ has done for us!* You're free from thinking, "I hope one day I'll be good enough." Freed from thinking, "I really hope God still loves me." Freed from thinking that you have to check off enough boxes in order for God to not get angry with you. Freed from being crushed under the weight of your sin, guilt, shame, and conviction. If you're trusting in Christ alone this morning through faith, then you are freed from the Law! Free from the impossible demands of trying to be good enough! Free from guilt, shame, and condemnation! You are righteous before God, on your best day and on your worst, because it's not about what we do - it's about what Christ has done for us! When you're convicted of your sin, you're free to lay all the guilt and shame of your sin at the feet of Christ through faith! You're free, right now, to really believe the gospel - you are forgiven! You are righteous! You are loved! You've been called to the freedom of grace!

So here's what that means; here's where the freedom of the gospel gets up close and personal for all of us: when you wake up in the morning and start to read your bible, or start to pray before you go to sleep, or start to think about church, and then all of the sudden, you're convicted of how you sinned that day, the night before, or that week, and you're *absolutely crushed by your guilt and shame* - what do you do? Well, you *don't* let your guilt and shame turn you to obedience! You don't say, "I feel so bad for sinning God, I promise I'm going to do better next time!" You don't go start obeying more and sinning less in order to ease your conscience so that you'll feel better about your relationship with God. If you go that path, it's just going to keep crushing you under the impossible burden of always trying to be good enough! That's not going to work - you'll never be good enough! Instead, when you feel the weight of your sin, guilt, and shame, don't let it turn you to being better - let it turn you to the gospel! When you feel conviction for your sin, run to the cross of Christ! Believe that Jesus paid it all for your sins! Believe that you are righteous in Christ through faith alone, not by works! Run to the Lord, confess your sins, ask Him to forgive you, and then believe that He has already forgiven you in Christ Jesus because of what Christ has done! Believe that He has already declared you righteous and loves you as His precious child, on your *worst day* just as much as on your best! Revel in the freedom of the gospel!

But that inevitably raises the question: if we're really free from the Law, even free from the guilt and condemnation it brings, then does that mean we don't have to obey God at all? If

freedom in Christ means our righteousness is based on what Jesus does for us, not based on what we do, well then what's the point of fighting sin, trying to obey God, and do what the Bible says? Or to put it differently: does freedom from the Law mean we are free to sin all we want and not worry about it? This is where Paul turns next, with a resounding, "By no means!" We see in point number two:

II. We are Not Free to Sin and Live by the Flesh (5:13b, 15)

The freedom of the gospel is not a license to sin. We see this in the next part of verse 13: "Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh..." After making very, very sure that we have no doubts about our justification being by faith in Christ alone, not by works, Paul now turns to make sure that we don't misunderstand the freedom of the gospel and abuse it as an excuse for us to just go on sinning.

I don't think many of us today would say that the freedom of the gospel means that we're free to go on sinning. But I *do* think we're tempted to functionally live this way. Have you ever been tempted to sin and then thought, "Well, what's the big deal if I give in this once? After all, I know God will forgive me! The Bible tells us that we are justified through faith alone, not works! So why not just sin a little, since you know you'll be forgiven?"

Brothers and sisters, when we start to think that way, we are using our freedom - the free grace of the gospel of Christ - as an opportunity for the flesh. And when we give in to the flesh because we start to think that way, we're not walking by the Spirit; we're not walking in freedom - we're living like *slaves*: slaves to sin, slaves to the flesh, even slaves to Satan.

How are you tempted to use your freedom in Christ as an opportunity for the flesh? What sins are you ignoring, covering up, and justifying in your life because you keep telling yourself that's ok to go on sinning because you know God will forgive you? Maybe you're tempted towards drunkenness. You know you're free in Christ to drink alcohol, and yet you abuse your freedom and use it as an opportunity to get drunk - and not just once, but regularly. Maybe even to the point where you've become dependent on alcohol, addicted to it. That's not the freedom of the Spirit - that's slavery to the flesh. Maybe you're tempted to look at lustful images, or read lustful books or watch trashy movies, and you try not to, but when the temptation gets too strong, you think, "Oh, just go ahead and give in, because you know you'll be forgiven by God anyways." That kind of thinking isn't from God; it's from Satan. That's not true freedom - it's slavery to the flesh.

So what do we do? How can we fight to not use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh? We remember that *sin is not arbitrary*. We remember that God loves us, and His commands are *good for us*. That His desire is *not* to withhold good things for us - no, GOD's desire for you, as His child, is for you to truly be free! To be free from the Law, free from sin, free from the tyranny of the flesh and Satan! God reveals and convicts us of our sin and commands us to repent and turn from it *because He loves us and knows that the sins we so desire in the flesh will actually destroy and devour us!*

The Puritan John Owen, in his classic work, *The Mortification of Sin*, famously wrote, "Be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you."¹ Ask any recovered addict from drugs, alcohol, pornography, or gambling - ask them what it's like to constantly give in to the sinful desires of the flesh, to constantly *be free to do everything you want to do* - and they'll tell: it's not freedom - it's a life of slavery. When we give in to the desires of the flesh, we're not walking in freedom; we're living like slaves. This corrupts our souls and destroys our lives. It devours us.

And this isn't just true for us as individuals - it's true for us in our *relationships*, as well; it's true for us as a *community, as a church body*. Paul issues a warning, in v.15: "But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another."

No one wants to live in a family where everyone in the house is constantly yelling and shouting and at each other's throats. No one wants to live in a house where you have to walk on eggshells whenever dad is home, just hoping you don't set him by accidentally saying or doing the wrong thing. No one wants to live in a home where mom is constantly tearing you down with harsh, criticizing words, biting remarks and constant nagging making you feel like you can never do anything right. No one wants to live in a home where your brothers and sisters are constantly fighting with you, stealing from you and breaking your things, or humiliating you. A house in which you constantly feel like you have to watch your back and feel like you can't trust the other people living in it isn't a home. A family that bites and devours one another consumes and destroys one another.

And it's the exact same way in a church family. If we go on living in the flesh, using the freedom of the gospel as an excuse to go on sinning against each other and pretending like that's

¹ John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, p.14.

ok, then we're actually going to *destroy and devour each other* - and that's going to destroy the church, each other's souls, and the gospel witness of the church.

Sin isn't arbitrary. God's commands are not arbitrary. No, the gospel isn't a list of do's and don'ts - it's about who Jesus is and what he has done, not what we do. But the gospel *does* call us to live differently. One of my previous pastors, Lee Tankersley, has a saying that I think helpfully captures this idea for us: Satan says to us, "Sin, sin, sin!" And then as soon as we do, he accuses us in our conscience and heaps condemnation on us, saying, "Look how sinful and guilty you are! God wants nothing to do with you now." But God says just the opposite: "Don't sin, don't sin, don't sin! But when you do sin, Jesus Christ is faithful and just to forgive you from all your sins, purely by grace." That's the freedom of the gospel! It's not the freedom *to* sin - it's the freedom to be liberated *from* sin! The freedom of the gospel means we are set free *in order to walk in love*. Which leads to our final point.

III. We are Free to Love and Serve One Another (5:13c-14)

We are free from the Law; but this doesn't mean we're free from sin! No, the gospel sets us free to repent from sin and follow Christ, to obey God and pursue holiness! But here's the important thing: the freedom of the gospel means we do not obey *in order to be saved* or *in order for God to be pleased with us and bless*. No, the gospel sets us free to obey *out of love*.

We see this in verses 13 and 14, saying, "but through love, serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" No, we're not free to sin - instead, we're free to fulfill the Law of God through love! We're empowered by the Spirit to fulfill the Law! We're free to love and serve one another just as Christ loves and served us!

True freedom in the gospel is exercised by loving and serving one another. The liberating grace of the gospel transforms us so that we want to love others just as we have been loved by Christ; the Spirit changes our hearts, so that we are no longer dead in our sins, slaves to the law of sin and death - we are now free to love and obey God by loving and serving others! Paul even says that when we do so, "the whole Law is fulfilled," and he quotes Lev. 19:10: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He's saying that this is a summary of the Law of Moses. Jesus said something similar, saying the Law could be summed up in the two commandments of loving God with all of who you are and loving your neighbor as yourself. Now at this point, we might say, "Hold on a second, Paul. YOU've just spent the entire book of Galatians arguing that we're not under the Law! So are you saying now that we *do* have to obey the Law?" No, that's not

what he's saying. Paul never tells us to "obey" or "keep" the Law. Instead, it says we *fulfill* the Law. As we saw in chapter 3, the Law of Moses was given to show us our sin and also prophetically point us to Jesus Christ. And this means that Christ perfectly fulfilled God's Law and righteousness; Jesus is the perfect picture of what the God demands; Jesus is the perfect picture of what it means to truly love God and obey Him, of what it truly means to selflessly love and serve others! Now that Christ has come, we're not under the law of Moses - we're under the Law of Christ! Paul uses that exact phrase in the next chapter, Gal. 6:2. We're called to be more like Jesus!

We fulfill the Law by walking in the Law of Christ - the Law of Love. We're not driven by the Ten Commandments. We're driven by something that is far more encompassing and demanding - we're driven by the love of Jesus! We're driven to love others just as much as Jesus does, just as much as He loves us! Now, to be sure, the Ten Commandments are teaching us about what it means to love other people. After all, if you love somebody, you're not going to murder them, or covet what they have and steal from them! If you love your wife, you're not going to cheat on her! If you love your parents, you're going to honor them! But the Law couldn't change anyone's heart. The Law says, "Don't murder!" But the Law of Christ means our hearts are actually changed by the Holy Spirit and transformed by the gospel! The love of Christ transforms us so that *we* are set free to truly love others! The love of Christ changes us, so that we *don't want* to murder or steal from our neighbor, because we love them! IN fact, we no longer want to harbor anger and hatred, or bitterness and revenge, or covetousness and jealousy, or lust and pride in our hearts because we want to *love* them, just like Christ loves us!

The Law of Moses is a list of do's and don'ts, of what's permitted and what's not. But the Law of Christ isn't so easy. We can't just ask, "Am I allowed to do this? Do I have to do that?" Instead, in every single situation, we're driven to ask, "How can I best love others in this situation? How can I best *serve* others as Christ has served me?" When we're secure in the freedom of the gospel, it sets us free, so that "through love" we can "serve one another," as verse 13 says. And strikingly, that verb "to serve" is from the same Greek word for "slave" that Paul has used so much in Galatians. Paul's making a play on words here. We are no longer "slaves" to the Law, yet we are now free in the gospel to become "slaves" of one another! That's how radical the freedom of the gospel is. True freedom in Christ means we are free to lovingly *serve* others - to make ourselves like slaves, servants of others, not ourselves!

And so let's ask each other this morning: what would look like for a church community to be truly transformed by the freedom of the gospel? What would it look like for *our church family* to be a place where we are so secure in the freedom of the gospel that it moves us to *sacrificially love and serve one another* with the very of Christ Jesus? It looks like a group of people who are committed to *loving each other* in the way that Jesus Christ models for us and commands in His Word, the Bible, no matter how difficult and costly it may be, because we know that the Spirit will empower us to do so. It looks like a church family where we are set free to confess our sins and weaknesses to one another, because we know that our fellow church members aren't going to bite and devour us, aren't going to shame and humiliate us and make us feel worse and beat up for our sin, but are instead going to remind us that we are free from guilt and condemnation in Christ! And they'll also remind us that we are set free *from sin and the flesh* and empowered by the Spirit to be more like Christ - a family who actually loves each other enough *to help each other fight sin and love each other like Christ does!* It looks like a husband who doesn't boss his wife around or tear her down with his words or force her to serve him, but instead sacrificially loves his wife, leading her by *selflessly serving her*, lovingly pursuing her, because his heart has been gripped by the love of Christ, who pursued us and loved us enough even to lay down his life for us! A woman feels like a failure as a wife and mom, but doesn't gossip in order to tear down other women to make herself feel better and convince herself that she's not that bad; no, instead, the gospel frees her to know that she is acceptable and pleasing before God in Christ, freeing her to lovingly encourage and build other women up! It means we don't read our Bibles and pray just to check the boxes of religious obligation; but we *do* eagerly read and study our Bibles and pray daily out of *love*, because we're eager to know and love the Lord more, eager for more of the gospel, that we might be prepared to resist temptation and be like Christ to everyone we meet that day! It means we prioritize going to church, not because being a church member saves us, but because we love the church family so much that we hate being apart from each other and long to gather, fellowship, encourage and exhort one another in the gospel, and worship the Lord together, week after week! It means our church meetings aren't full of us getting angry and bitter and yelling at each other, but instead means we're quick to be gracious, generous, and loving, because the gospel frees us from having to defend ourselves! Because we know how much Christ has forgiven us - how can we not also forgive and love one another? It looks like a church family where we see one another in need and we eagerly, joyfully give

generously to care for one another! We're not slaves to the Law, bound to a list of do's and don'ts; we don't ask, "well, what am I obligated to do to be a good Christian?" That's anti-gospel thinking! INstead, the gospel sets our hearts free, and we're so overwhelmed with the love of Christ for us that we ask, "How can I go out of my way to love and serve my neighbor, my fellow church family member, the person sitting across the room for me, the brand new visitor, the person who lives with me, the person who doesn't know the Lord, or the person who even hates me, just as much as Jesus loves me?"

That's what the freedom of the gospel looks like! And it all comes from us resting in the glorious freedom of knowing that our identity, our value and worth, our righteousness, our salvation, our standing before God, our standing before one another, our acceptance as God's beloved children, is not based on what we do, not based on whether or not we meet up to expectations, not based on whether or not we've fallen short this week, but it's purely based on what Jesus Christ has done *for you!* And that's freeing! We don't love and serve each other to make our guilt go away. As I said earlier, when we feel conviction for our sin, we go to the cross and believe the gospel! But then, that same gospel leads us to say, "Because I've been freed from the law of sin and death, I want to go forth and sin no more! Because I've been so loved by God, I want to love others just as much as Christ has loved me!" We're free to love one another!

So I want to ask you, this morning: Have you tasted the freedom of the gospel? When you think of God and Christianity, has your experience been freedom? Or has it felt more like the burden of slavery? Perhaps you're experience with Christianity and the church hasn't been anything like freedom - perhaps you've always thought of God as an impossible taskmaster, of the Bible as a list of restricting and impossible rules, of Christianity as a suffocating burden that crushes you and enslaves you in guilt and condemnation. If that's you're experience, then what you need is for the gospel of Christ Jesus to come and set you free! The reason you feel so burdened by the impossible demands is because *you could never live up to those demands and you could never be good enough!* But the good news is, you don't have to be! Jesus was good enough for you! Jesus died on the cross for your sins to set you free, even from your guilt and condemnation! Just believe this good news, just trust in Christ, and He will set you free! And then, make your faith public through baptism so that we can link arms together as we seek to love each other just as much as CHrist loves us. If you have any questions about this gospel, about baptism, or about joining this church, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.