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Galatians 4:21 - 5:1

Slavery to Works-Based Righteousness vs. Freedom of the Gospel

If you've ever driven through New Hampshire, you've no doubt seen their state slogan: "Live free or die." It's a bold, provocative statement, saying freedom is more valuable than life. And this isn't just a New Hampshire think; just think of America's founding, of the revolutionary war, and of Patrick Henry's famous words, "Give me liberty, or give me death." You can't tell the story of America without talking about a high value in freedom. But you also can't tell the story of America without mentioning the *opposite* of freedom: slavery. Our nation was built to be a land of the free, yet also built on the backs of slaves, a history fraught with the inconsistencies of the "land of the free" also being the land of slavery for so many.

Freedom and slavery are opposites - you can't be both free and a slave. They are incompatible. And the desire for freedom isn't just American. If you asked any person, in any time or place in all of history, if they would rather be a slave or free, I feel pretty confident that they would say they'd rather be free. No one wants to be enslaved. No one wants to be bound in captivity. We all want to be free. And if this is true physically, then how much more valuable is *spiritual freedom*? Yet spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom are much more subtle realities. It's perfectly possible to be physically free, yet spiritually a slave; or, to be physically a slave, and yet spiritually free! It's also just as possible to be spiritually enslaved, and yet not even realize it. All of us here today are free citizens, enjoying an incredible amount of freedom as Americans - and yet the question remains: are you truly free? Are you *spiritually* free? Or are you spiritually bound? Are you living in the slavery of works-based righteousness, bound to the idea that your life, your value, your standing before God, even your eternal salvation, depends on your own works, efforts, and performance? Or have you been set free by the beautiful, glorious grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

That's the crucial question that we're confronted with in Galatians 4:21 - 5:1. IN this passage, Paul is drawing a sharp distinction between those who are *slaves* and those who are *free, children of the promise*. And yet, this passage is infamously difficult to interpret and understand; in fact, many pastors and commentators call it one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. So I think it'll be helpful to just briefly remember why Paul's writing the

letter to the Galatians and what he's saying in it. Paul shared the gospel and planted churches in Galatia, a region outside of Israel. But then, false teachers came down from Jerusalem - Jews who claimed to believe in Christ, but began to tell these new, Gentile Christians that to *really* be saved and be part of God's people, they needed to become good Jews, by being circumcised and obeying the Law of Moses. So Paul is writing this letter, telling the Galatians - and us! - that *this is not true*, but is actually a *denial* of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, that salvation is by free grace through faith in Christ alone, not works of the Law! In chapter 2, Paul told us that we are justified - declared righteous - before God by faith alone, not by works. In chapter 3, we saw that true sons of Abraham - those who inherit eternal life as God's people - are not ethnic Jews, nor even those who obey the Law, but those who trust in Christ alone! In chapter 3 and 4, Paul has drawn a contrast between being *slaves* and *sons* - showing us that the law brings slavery, whereas faith in Christ makes us sons of God and heirs of the promise! And now, this theological argument Paul is making comes to a climax at the end of chapter 4. He has just warned the Galatians that if they listen to the false teachers and become slaves of the law, thinking that righteousness and salvation comes through faith in Christ *plus* works and obedience, then they will not be saved at all! Paul yearns for them to cling to the gospel and not go back to slavery.

So, he asks, in v.21, "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" Paul is about to continue his theological argument, showing that even the Old Testament Scriptures themselves, the books that give us the Law, make it very, very clear that salvation comes not from works of the law, but through faith in the promises of God. He draws a clear contrast here between those who are *slaves to the Law* and those who are *free children of the promises of God*. First, we'll see Paul's complex, yet powerful argument in verses 22-27. Then, we'll see how Paul applies these glorious truths to the Galatians, and how they apply to our lives today as well, in verses 28 - 5:1.

First, let's unpack Paul's difficult argument, which we can summarize as...

I. We are Either Slaves to Works-Based Righteousness or Free Children of the Promise (4:21-28)

Paul's argument here is dense, but he's essentially drawing contrasts: between two women - Sarah and Hager; two sons - Isaac and Ishamel; between two covenants - the law covenant of Moses, which was a covenant of works, and the Abrahamic covenant, a covenant of grace, which is ultimately fulfilled in the New Covenant of Christ. And his point is that the old

covenant of works gives birth to children of slavery, while the covenant of grace in Christ gives birth to children who are free, heirs of the promises of God. That's the point Paul is making. And he's doing it by looking back at passages from the Old Testament, dealing with Abraham, his wives, and his sons. But as I said, his argument here is very complex and a little hard to follow. So let's break it up a little. Paul reminds us of the facts of the story, in verses 22-23, then interprets it in light of the rest of Scripture in verses 24-27.

First, we're given the plain facts of the story of Abraham's two sons, Isaac and Ishamel, as we see it in Genesis 19-21. Verses 22-23 say, "For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise." Paul has already spoken a lot about Abraham in the book of Galatians. We've seen that God promised Abraham that his offspring would be God's people, inheriting God's promised land, and would receive God's promised blessing - even making it available to all the nations of the earth! Paul has made very clear (in Galatians 3) that the offspring was always Christ, who brings the blessings of salvation to all who trust in Him! But in Genesis, God's promise to Abraham begins to be fulfilled with the birth of a promised son. You see, Abraham was very old, and his wife Sarah was very old, too; she had been barren all her life, and was now so old that it was physically impossible for her to give birth. God promised to bring about these glorious blessings through Abraham's offspring, yet he had no children! And the whole point, of course, was for Abraham and Sarah to have faith, to trust God to make good on his promises. Yet they grew impatient. They started to doubt. They decided that God needed some help, that they needed to take matters into their own hands and bring about God's promises *through their own efforts* - through the flesh. And so, Sarah gave Abraham her maidservant, Hagar, to Abraham as a second wife. Hagar bore Abraham a son - Ishmael. Yet this was not the child of promise - not brought about by the miraculous work of God, but by the flesh, by human schemes, efforts, and will. Furthermore, this child was not the free heir of Abraham, but a slave, being born to the slave woman, Hagar.

But Abraham eventually had a second son - Isaac. And this son wasn't born to Hagar, but to *Sarah*, the old, barren, childless woman! This birth defied physical, natural biology - it was impossible for Sarah to have a child in the flesh! Yet this was not a child of the flesh, but a child of promise. Isaac was born because God kept His promise and did the impossible! Abraham and Sarah couldn't do anything to keep God's covenant - all they needed to do was trust God to do it

for them! So right there in the story itself we see that principle very clearly: Ishmael was born as a result of their lack of faith in God, trusting in themselves, in their flesh, while Isaac was the “child of the promise,” born by the power of God, not man, according to GOD’s promise of grace, received through faith, not by the flesh.

Next, Paul begins to interpret the significance of this passage further, saying, “Now this may be interpreted allegorically.” So this is where the passage starts to get hard. The first difficulty is Paul’s use of the word “allegory.” The word “allegory” can have different meanings, especially when it comes to interpreting the Bible. In its most general sense, it just means “figuratively.” It can also refer to the practice of reading passages from the Old Testament and imposing our own thoughts and meanings onto the text, reading our own interpretations into the passage rather than reading what the author intended to say. Now, if you’ve heard me teach on how to read and study the Bible, then you’ll know that I think that is *not* the way we’re supposed to interpret scripture! We’re always supposed to find GOD’s intended meaning by interpreting the *human author’s* intended meaning. We can’t just impose our own thoughts onto the text - we have to find what’s already there. But is that what Paul’s doing here? Is Paul playing fast and loose with the text? No, I don’t think he is. When he uses the word “allegorical,” I think he just means “figuratively” here. He’s already given a sound interpretation of what Genesis itself says: that Ishmael was born according to the flesh, while Isaac was born according to the promise of God. Trusting self verses trusting GOD; flesh verses faith. Now, Paul is taking the principle of that story and showing how it connects to the rest of the storyline of Scripture, and then ultimately, to us.

He says, in verses 24-26: “these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” It’s plain and clear that Hagar, the slave woman, represents the flesh (trusting in human works and efforts) whereas Sarah, and the child born to her, represent faith in the promise of God. Now, Paul connects these women to two covenants: the covenants of Abraham and Moses. The Law Covenant of Moses was based on works - according to the flesh, just like Hagar and Ishmael. Now Paul reverses the comparison; he says just like Hagar is a slave, who gives birth to a slave son, so the Law Covenant of Moses creates children who are also slaves. The covenant of Abraham is not based on works, but grace! Not according to flesh,

but faith! Paul connects the dots for us: “present Jerusalem,” that is, ethnic and religious Jews under the Law, are *slaves*, just like Hagar! Israel prided itself on being Abraham’s sons - yet Paul is shockingly saying here, you may physically be Abraham’s sons, but you’re not *children of the promise*, you’re *slaves*! Why? Because they are slaves to the law and works-based righteousness, living by the flesh. Those who trust in the flesh - in yourself - for righteousness and life with God *never find it*; we can’t keep the Law, we can’t be good enough, we can’t earn life and righteousness; instead, we just earn the curse, judgment, and condemnation. Those who trust in the law are slaves to the law - and therefore, slaves of sin and death. We’ve seen this very clearly throughout our study of Galatians. But thankfully, there’s another option.

By contrast, Sarah, the free woman, corresponds to “the Jerusalem above,” that is, heavenly Jerusalem, the true people of God, whom are “free.” This represents the Abraham covenant being fulfilled in the New Covenant - a covenant of *grace*, which brings freedom from the law, sin, and death! And lest we think Paul is playing fast and loose with the text, Paul proves he is reading scripture rightly, in v. 27, by quoting Isa 54:1, and it’s surrounding context. Isaiah speaks of Israel as a barren woman, who lost her husband, who will rejoice because she will finally give birth to children. The context makes clear this is Israel, who was held captive in exile, as slaves to Babylon and Assyria, because they broke GOD’s Law Covenant. Yet, God is promising they will be saved, not based on their obedience, but by GOD’s grace, according to promise, not works! Thus true, spiritual Israel will be like the mother, Sarah, who was barren, and gave birth to the child of promise.

Therefore, the true covenant people of God, the true spiritual ISrael, the children of the promise, are those who are *born of the Spirit of GOD*, born into Heavenly Jerusalem, united to Christ by grace through faith in the gospel! We become Children of the Promise when we are born again of the spirit, the second we trust in Christ alone for salvation! This is why Paul can say in vs. 28: “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of the promise.”

This passage makes it very clear that there are only *two kinds of people*: Those born of the flesh, and those born of the spirit. Those “born according to the flesh” are these are those who rely on their own works for righteousness; they are slaves to the Law, and ultimately, slaves to sin and death; they trust in themselves, their own good works, their own moral efforts, their religious performance; they’re not trusting Jesus to do it all for them. The way of legalism and works-based righteousness is slavery - slavery to the law, slavery to sin, slavery to pride and self

and unbelief. Such people may think themselves good and holy, and may even appear to look good on the outside, but they deceive themselves and others; they are not walking in faith in the Lord, but are actually *driven by the flesh*.

Those “born according to the Spirit” are the same as those born to the free woman - the children of promise, those who are born again of the Spirit by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. We are no longer slaves but free in Christ! We are not slaves to the Law, not slaves to sin, but free in Christ. We don’t trust in ourselves, our own works, our own will, efforts, or performance - we trust Jesus to do it all for us, through His life, death, and resurrection! We trust in His liberating grace!

So the question for you today is: which group do you belong to? Are you a slave, trusting in yourself and relying on your own works for righteousness? Or have you been set free by the liberating gospel of grace in Christ Jesus?

After making it clear who are spiritually slaves and who are spiritually free, Paul now brings this dense theological argument home, applying it to our lives as believers. And the first application we see is...

II. The Incompatibility of Spiritual Slaves and Free Children of Promise (4:29-30)

So everyone in the world is divided into these two groups: either slave or free; either of the flesh or of the Spirit. And these two types of people aren’t compatible with each other - there isn’t room for both in the kingdom of God.

Paul first makes this point negatively, in v. 29: “But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.” Paul goes back to the story of Isaac and Ishmael, specifically to Gen. 21, where Ishmael, the son of the slave woman, is “laughing” and mocking Isaac, the child of the promise. Paul’s point is that the same principle will continue to be true, both in Paul’s day, and in ours: those who rely on the flesh (the law, works-based righteousness) persecute the children of the promise, who rely on God’s grace through faith alone.

The point for the Galatians is that the false teachers (Judaizers) who were trying to get them to become slaves of the Law were actually born of the “flesh” and were “persecuting” the Galatian believers, who were of the Spirit. The application for us is clear: we will be persecuted by those who are born of the flesh (non-believers) who are slaves to the Law, to sin, and to works-based righteousness.

There are many who claim to be Christians, sometimes even entire churches, that are legalistic and very harsh, making lots of man-made, non-biblical rules and imposing them on others, making *their own thoughts* the standard of righteousness. As we walk in the freedom of grace that the gospel brings, there will be those who claim to be Christians yet bitterly despise the way of grace and harshly berate us for not following the way of legalism. But righteousness doesn't come from man-made notions of morality; it comes from being united to Christ by grace through faith alone!

And this means that the true covenant community of God's people is made up of the children of promise, those born of the spirit through faith in Christ, not those born of the flesh who are slaves to their own works. This is why Paul gives the quotation and exhortation in v.30: "But what does the scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.'"

It's like the Western movie cliché, where the sheriff and renegade outlaw face each other in the middle of the town for a duel. With hands on holsters, one of them says, "This town ain't big enough for the both of us." The upright Sheriff and the outlaw bandit can't just peacefully be part of the same town together and just get along; the outlaw breaks the law, the Sheriff keeps it, and this means the Sheriff has to lock the bandit up in jail and enforce justice; either that, or the bandit has to run the Sheriff out of town. The town isn't big enough for both of them. The outlaw and the Sheriff are incompatible with each other.

And so it is in the New Covenant community: there isn't room for both legalistic works-based righteousness *and* the freedom of the true gospel! Only those who rely on faith in Christ alone receive the inheritance of eternal life. And it is our job, as believers, to make this *explicitly clear* in the context of the local church community. This passage reminds us of the importance of *regenerate church membership* - that is, the importance of making sure that every single person that *joins the church* is, as far as we can tell, truly a believer, truly understanding and trusting in the one, true gospel. Being apart of the church isn't just for anyone who wants to join; it's only for those who are born of the Spirit, not the flesh; it's only for Christians, those who are not trusting in themselves or their own works for salvation, but are trusting in the gospel promises of God alone! AND that's *not* because we want to be stuck-up and exclusive - not at all! It's because we really believe that *only those who trust in Christ alone will truly be saved from their sins!* Therefore, it does no one any good for us to give anyone false assurance. Instead, we

want membership to mean something. This is why we take membership seriously here; it's why we encourage people not just to attend, but to consider joining; and it's also why we have a membership class and a process for joining. When someone says they want to join, we must do due diligence to make sure they truly understand the gospel and give a credible profession of faith.

When someone becomes a member, or remains a member, we as a church are putting our *stamp of approval* on their profession of faith, saying that we vouch for them as a true believer! And this is so important because the gospel must be what most fundamentally defines us - both as individual Christians, and as a church. We must make very clear that works-based righteousness and legalism have no place in our hearts or church community, so that we can instead walk in the freedom of the gospel. Which brings us to our final point...

III. We Must Reject Works-Based Righteousness and Stand Firm in the Freedom of the Gospel (4:31-5:1)

The passage ends by reminding us who we are in Christ and giving us an exhortation to live in light of this gospel reality. It says, "So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." We are the "free children" of promise, born by the Spirit, through faith in Christ; we have been set free for freedom - to live in the freedom of the gospel! Paul's gives us two exhortations for how to live in light of who we are in Christ - as those set free.

First, we must "stand firm" in the freedom of the gospel. We must be resolute in our conviction of the truth of the gospel - the good news of free grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone - no matter what opposition we receive from others, from Satan, or even our own flesh. We must constantly remember and proclaim that we are free from the law's demands; we're justified by faith, not works! Secondly, Paul says, "Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Therefore, we must *put to death* and avoid at all cost all forms of legalism and works-based righteousness in our own hearts and minds, every single day. And yet, the temptation towards slavery can be quite subtle.

We are all so prone to slip back into legalistic ways of thinking. We are so prone to begin thinking that our standing before GOD is based on our own obedience or disobedience. We're so prone to live by flesh, to root our identity in *what we do* rather than *who we are in Christ!* And Satan loves to get us to forget who we are in CHrist. When Satan accuses us of being sinners

who deserve God's wrath, we're so prone to forget the good news of the gospel, that Christ has already paid the penalty for our sin and set us free! We start to think, "Yeah, Satan's right. I'm a sinner. I keep failing over and over again. I keep doing the wrong thing. Of course God is still mad at me. Of course I'm not good enough to show my face in church. Of course God doesn't want anything to do with me." But that's not true! That's forgetting the gospel! When you're aware of your sin, and wracked with guilt and shame, and you start to think, "I need to show God how sorry I am by cleaning my act up and start being better, so that God will forgive me and keep loving me," reject that as anti-gospel! When you feel guilt and shame, look to the cross - and believe that Christ bore the full penalty of the Law for you! You are *free* from the Law, free from guilt and shame, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ!

We're tempted to fall back into slavery, thinking, "I gotta obey more; I gotta read the Bible, pray, go to church, give, and serve more or else I'm not gonna be saved, and God's not going to love me, or He's going to curse me." That's slavery to the flesh! Instead, we must steadfastly remember the truth of the gospel - that we have been set free! That we are children of promise, born of the spirit! Based not on anything we do or don't do, but purely based on what Jesus Christ has done for us! We don't obey out of fear; we don't obey in order to earn righteousness. We can't earn our freedom. But we don't have to - Christ has freed us by His blood! This means we are *free to obey as sons, not slaves!* We obey *because* we are free! Therefore, let us walk in the freedom of the gospel! Let us *fight* all legalistic ways of thinking!

This is why it is *so important* for us to constantly be reminded of the truths of the gospel, that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, that Jesus's righteousness is our righteousness, simply through faith in God's promise! This is why it's so important that we preach the gospel *to ourselves and each other, constantly!* This is why it's so important that we remember, sing, pray, preach, teach, read, and believe the gospel day after day, week after week! Our hearts are prone to wander; our flesh is prone to go back to slavery. Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us not go back to slavery; let us put legalism and works-based righteousness to death; let us stand firm and live in the freedom of the gospel!

And one great tool God has given us in helping us remember the truth of the gospel is the gift of Communion. So if you're trusting in the gospel of grace through faith in Christ alone this morning, as a baptized believer in good standing with a gospel preaching church, then we invite you to come to the table with us in just a few moments, as we publicly profess our faith in this

gospel and visibly remind each other that our identity is not found in what we do or don't do, but is found in what Jesus has done *for* us!

But if you're not a Christian, there's a different way for you to respond. The first step is for you to recognize that you're enslaved to sin and cannot do anything to free yourself from the condemnation we all deserve; but the second step is to believe that Jesus Christ has done everything necessary *for you!* Just believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins and rose again, and you will be set free from the law of sin and death! Trust in GOD's promise of free grace, and you will be born again, as an heir of eternal life in Christ! Then, come and let us know so that you can profess your faith through baptism as we affirm your faith in the gospel. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you.

Let us have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the table; then I'll pray for us, and then I'll invite you to come down.