

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Lesson 9 – Free To Be Free (Gal. 5:1-15)

In Lesson 8, we considered whether the concept of gospel freedom is merely an empty phrase that sounds good in Bible classes and worship services or whether the gospel message actually translates into tangible freedoms for us as Christians. In Galatians 4, Paul contrasted the freedom which we should enjoy as God's children and joint heirs with Christ to the slavery experienced by those who seek to live exclusively or primarily based on rules, regulations, and law. As one who has received and believed the gospel message, Paul is obviously speaking about freedom based on his personal experience, and in hindsight he now understands the bondage of his former life. Paul wants the Galatians and us to experience freedom from the fear of unseen evil forces that haunt us as humans, freedom from a never-ending quest to earn God's love and to be "good enough" in His eyes, and freedom from a religion that elevates the importance of our efforts above what God has done for us in Christ. Of course, being free from something or someone doesn't necessarily tell us what we should be free to do or to be. Fortunately, Paul's letter continues in what we call Chapters 5 and 6.

In Gal. 5:1, Paul tells us that Christ set us free simply so that we could be free. **When Paul tells us that Christ set us free, he uses a verb tense that denotes a completed past action.** By Paul's words, we see that Christ is not in the process of setting us free, and neither does Paul say that Christ will set us free sometime in the future. **Paul says that Jesus has set us free, and He has done it just so we can enjoy freedom, for freedom's sake.** Christ wants me to be free, pure and simple. Christ wants you to be free, pure and simple. Now, that's some good news, isn't it? Sure, it is. It's great! Ok, but now let's get real. Here's the bad news. Most of us probably don't have a clue what real freedom is and how to enjoy it, and every time we start to get near it, we back away from it as if it were an electric fence. **For all our big talk about wanting to be free or wishing we were, true freedom, freedom without strings attached, what Jesus in John 8:36 calls being free indeed, scares us to death. When the gates are opened and we are free to leave, we often choose to remain in the security of what we know or think we know, what everyone else is doing or thinking, or what this world tells us to do or think.** All too often, we are prisoners not just of our past actions and habits but also of our existing thought patterns and our old views, patterns and views shaped by a world filled with bondage. That is all we have ever known all our lives. Jesus has purchased our freedom with his death, punched our ticket to a new life with a new way of viewing God, ourselves, and others, and yet, we all too often stay seated when the train pulls out of the station. Maybe we'll catch the next one.

After telling the Galatians and us that Christ has set us free (completed action), he tells us that we have to keep standing firm (continuing action) to remain free. Paul's command to keep standing firm has an almost military sound to it, implying that we must stay alert, be strong, and be prepared to resist attack. Sometimes those attacks can come from outside of ourselves. Throughout his letter to the Galatians, Paul has sought to fend off the efforts of those who would adulterate or modify the gospel message by insisting that Christians are required to be circumcised (See Lesson 3). In Chapter 1, he said

that anyone, himself included, who preaches another gospel than the one he preached to the Galatians should be accursed. Here in Gal. 5:3-4, he states again (compare with Gal. 3:10) that anyone who receives circumcision is obligated to keep the whole law, and then he states plainly that anyone who seeks to be justified by the law has been severed from Christ and has fallen from grace. These are strong words, but the strongest may be found in Gal. 5:12 where he wishes that those who are disturbing the peace and unity of the Galatian churches would even mutilate or emasculate themselves. Enough said. I think he has made his point.

Sometimes attacks on our freedom come from others, but sometimes they come from within us, from our own passions and lusts. In Gal. 5:13, Paul states our freedom as Christians is not to be used as a license for our fleshly desires. Our lusts and fleshly desires may whisper in our ears that "this is the way to freedom", but Jesus, Peter, Paul, and even our own experiences tell us differently (John 8:34, II Pet. 2:17-19, Rom. 6:15-16). Say the word lust, and as the saying goes, "dirty-minded" people think of only one thing. In reality, lusts come in all shapes and sizes. Greed, covetousness, and the desire for power and control over others (sometimes in the name of religion) are all rooted in our fleshly lusts, and they all lead to what Paul refers to as biting and devouring one another (Gal. 5:15). As we discussed in Lesson 7, comparing one another, criticizing one another, and disparaging one another are not conducive to Christian unity, and they are hardly fitting behaviors for those who claim to be God's children and joint heirs with Christ.

If we are not free to follow our fleshly lusts, what are we free to do? Well, loving one another might be a good place to start for those who say they want to be like their Savior (Gal. 5:13-15). After all, Jesus did love us and give Himself for us (Gal. 2:20-21). As we continue in Chapter 5, Paul will tell us that the flesh and the Spirit are in opposition to one another. Chasing our fleshly desires, the big ones and the little ones, will lead to slavery. Walking after the Spirit will result in freedom, freedom to be and freedom to become. Free to be and become what? Well, we have to read on.

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February 2016