

I. Intro / Greetings

A. Braveheart is a movie with some great moments – and I think this scene is one of them. He appeals to people’s innate desire for freedom – and we can relate to that. I thought about playing excerpts from some of Dr. Martin Luther King’s speeches. They have a similar resonance. It seems to me that almost all “rallies to freedom” appeal to something deep within us. We all deeply want to be free. It’s a wonderful feeling.

B. As I have been thinking about freedom – and reading about it, I have been struck by a few things. First, that the goal today has to be that we feel a sense of lightness.

1. I am not sure what is weighing you down – what is pushing you down: debt, fear, sin, addiction. We know what freedom feels like. Probably no where more palpably felt that as a high school or college student after taking that last exam before summer break. Free at last. One of my great disappointments of adulthood is that we’re never quite that free again.

C. Second, that when it comes to freedom, there is a lot of confusion.

1. It’s clear that people want to be free. Mel Gibson – AKA William Wallace - was talking about political freedom. If you listen you hear people talk about their desire for artistic, sexual, financial and the like.

2. It’s clear that this is a big deal today. One cultural observer wrote: Freedom has become “the baseline, cultural narrative of the West; the highest human good, the only remaining moral imperative we have left.”

3. It’s clear that many now think that freedom means no limits:

a) We need look no further than Disney, where Elsa, of Frozen fame, sings, “It is time to see what I can do. To test the limits and break through. No rights no wrongs no rules for me, I’m free.”¹

b) We see this kind of thinking in the courts. In Planned Parenthood versus Casey, the court declared that, “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” The SCOTUS said, we are free to define our conception of existence, meaning, the universe and the mystery of life.

4. I think it’s also clear to those who think about it, that this definition has some problems.

a) Our freedoms start bumping into each other. I could illustrate this by talking about this past week’s Supreme Court ruling on the Colorado baker who refused to bake a cake for a gay couple. The couple sued and won. The case was appealed all the way up to the Supreme Court. The outcome is not my point here – my point is, what cases like this highlight are how the freedoms of one person bump up against the freedoms of another.²

b) But my point is more basic than that. Forget the desires of two different people or groups, I have conflicting desires. I have a desire to eat whatever I want and a desire to be in shape. It’s not true that there are no limits.

D. I could go on,³ but I think that’s enough. It is clear that our culture celebrates freedom – as it has been defined by Elsa from Frozen: No right, no wrong, no limits.

E. I want to say, that definition is a bit naïve – freedom is a bit more bounded than that. You will find your greatest freedom when you accept the love of God and you follow the path He has marked out. Not out of fear or the thought that you have to earn God’s favor, but out of an awareness of that love.

II. Turn to Galatians five. This is the ninth message in this series. So far we have established:

A. That Galatians was written by Paul when he was mad. It's an angry letter, one in which Paul takes his friends behind the tool shed and scolds them.

B. Two: the big issue is salvation by grace. Paul is mad because he thinks they should know better than to listen to the people they are listening to. Paul had shared the Good News with them – he had told them that God loved them and had sent his son for them and that whoever believed in Jesus would not perish but gain ever lasting life. The equation is: Faith = Salvation + Works. But after he and Barnabas left the region to start other churches, a group of religious Jews claiming that they had a slightly improved message rolled into town. They said they had just a few tweaks to make to what Paul had said - a few minor improvements. “Believe in Jesus and keep the law. It's not $F = S + W$, but $F + W = S$.” And “the works” equate to embracing Jewish religious culture – which included being circumcised. When Paul hears about this he comes out swinging. He says, this is a Gospel that is not a Gospel. The tweaks they are adding are not small modifications, they undo everything.

C. Three, the language used in this letter has been harsh. Today it is harsher.

D. Four: It's dense. And today it's dense again. Freedom is a complicated topic. And though the goal is to make it simple, it only gets so simple.

III. Galatians 5: 1: **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.** Paul says that we are free. We are not told to fight for our freedom. We are being told that we are free.

A. From what? If we look at other discussions of freedom in the Bible we see that we should be free from guilt and fear. In this specific case, he is writing that we should be free – You should feel free – from the weight of trying to be good enough to earn God's love. Paul is writing about freedom from the hassles of the Law.

B. This past Thursday night at the HP service, a woman was sharing about her neighbors who are trying to follow the Law as orthodox Christians and she was mentioning how hard that can be.

IV. **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.** But Paul immediately suggests that we can lose it.⁴ **Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.**

A. A yoke is this wooden harness that allowed two animals – usually oxen - to pull a plow or cart.⁵ PICTURE? In the Old Testament,⁶ the term was used symbolically to refer to slavery or bondage.⁷ Jesus promises that if we harness up with him, the load is light.

B. Please notice the word “again.” **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.**

C. Discussion about slavery leads us to think about American slavery. It would have lead first century Jews to think about their past – during which: they had been slaves in Egypt, God freed them and then given them a law that was designed in part to keep them free, but they largely ignored it, and fall back into slavery. A first century Jew would always have that in the back of their mind.

D. But Paul is not writing to Jews he is writing to Gentiles. The Galatians had been pagans before they became Christians. As pagans they were slaves to the whims of whatever small g god they were following. Those that were a fisherman were trying to please the sea gods; those that were looking for a spouse were trying to please the beauty god or the matchmaking god; if you were a soldier you were trying to please the military gods. And it was all confusing and exhausting.

E. The point is, they were free from that and now Paul is suggesting that if they listen to the Judaizers – and become religious conservatives – this will be no better than being a pagan. The point is, following the Law leads to a form of slavery.⁸

V. V2: Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

A. Circumcision was something that set Jewish men apart. It was something they did to be identified as Jews, and to advertise their commitment to the Law.

B. The Galatian Christians were Gentiles. They had not been circumcised and there is no spiritual reason for them to be circumcised. But they are signing up to be circumcised because the Judaizers are saying that if they want to be right with God they need to do this.

C. Paul is saying, if you are signing up to be circumcised because you think this is going to help you in your relationship with God, not only is it not necessary, it's BAD. Doing anything to try to earn God's favor is wrong. It negates grace. It misrepresents God.

VI. V3: Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

A. Remember, the Law breaks out into three categories: 1) the Civil; 2) the Ceremonial; and 3) the Moral. And the Law served several purposes: 1) it provided the Jews with guidelines that helped them survive the long trek between being freed from Egypt and the birth of Christ; 2) it helped people know how to live – because the laws flow out of God's character; and 3) it helped people understand that they fell short of God's standards. It was an objective bar that anyone who is not massively deluded realizes they cannot jump over.

B. Paul is not against Christians paying attention to the moral law and trying to live in light of it. He is not against trying to be good or good works. He is not saying the moral law doesn't matter or that works do not matter. They matter. Jesus reframes the law around love and tells us to pursue it.⁹ Faith without works is dead. The issue is what side of the equal sign they are on. The issue is motivation.

1. Doing good works to try to please God is religion. It is wrong. It doesn't work. It's a trap. Doing good works out of thankfulness for God's love and grace is wonderful. It's natural and expected.

2. The reason for obedience makes all the difference. If you get up early to pray because you are trying to earn points with God you may be better of sleeping in. If you are getting up to meet with God because He saved you and you want to serve Him, great! Yes.

VII. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

A. If you are honest with yourself, you do not follow the law and think, "I am really good." Especially if you have heard Christ interpret the Law, which is what the Sermon on the Mount is. You do not come away from that thinking, "I've got this down. One hundred percent obedience one hundred percent of the time. No problem." You think, I cannot do this. I need help.

VIII. V5: For through the Spirit

A. We are about to see a lot more focus on the Holy Spirit. Over the next couple weeks this will be the theme.

IX. V:5 For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

- A. Hope in the New Testament is different than hope in English. In the Bible it means something much more like certainty than wishful thinking.
- B. If we are trying to save ourselves, we can never be sure. But in verse 5 we see that we are eager for what comes next. There is certainty.

x. V6: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. 7

- A. It is not that we are left without direction. Just because we are not under the law doesn't mean we are not called to love God and serve others. We are coached to that end.

XI. You were running a good race.

- A. Running is one of Paul's favorite metaphors for the Christian life.

XII. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? We then get a few verses about the false teachers. And then, dropping down to verse 12 we get the harsh language I mentioned: V12: As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

XIII. So what do we learn? What are our takeaways on Freedom.

- A. First: Freedom is a good thing. God celebrates freedom. He gave us freedom.
 1. God made a world with freedom and Christ worked to secure our freedom. Freedom is a good thing. It's a complicated thing. It has led to some problem. In the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoyevsky calls it "that terrible gift." But we can be sure, Freedom is part of God's plan.
- B. Second, the freedom he gives us is the freedom that comes from love and limits.
 1. Most people are either borrowing a definition from Greek philosophers, Enlightenment thinkers,¹⁰ political theorists, Disney producers, psychologist.¹¹
 2. Most people understand that their freedom cannot hurt someone else – but there is no real agreement on what that means. And at the moment more than a few people talk as if they have the right to be a Disney character who lives in a world with no rights, no wrongs, no rules and no limits. Where we are our own moral universe.
 3. The popular definition of freedom doesn't line up with reality. The freedom that Christ is offering is the freedom that comes out of the law – in that order.
 4. People can say what they'd like, but the idea that we can free from all constraints and restraints – that we can live without limits and do what we want to do – is an unworkable definition. It's a slogan. It's a battle cry. But we are dependent on others and on reality.
 5. There are freedoms not just freedom– freedom of health vs freedom of pleasure. Here is a money line: real freedom comes from the strategic loss of some freedoms. We have to say no to all kinds of things. We can do whatever we want but only for a brief while.
 6. Absolute freedom is not an absolute – our definition of freedom needs to line up with reality.¹²
- C. Third: It is fragile.
- D. Fourth: Religious conservatives are the biggest threat to freedom.¹³ This is the big point of Galatians 5

1. Who are the people who are getting in trouble with Paul – the religious do-gooders. The people who say: it's Jesus plus good works.
2. Who was getting in trouble with Jesus – the Pharisees, who made it a point to try really, really hard to be good enough to earn God's favor.
3. Who is the biggest problem in the parable of the Prodigal Son? The Older Brother. The Prodigal repents and embraces his Father. The Older Brother pitches a hissy fit and will not come into the party.
4. Who gets in trouble in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector?
5. In every case, it's the religious conservative getting read the riot act. Why, they think their devotion to the law is what is going to earn them God's favor.

XIV. Freedom comes from love and strategic limits – in that order

¹ Thanks to Tim Keller and his talk on Freedom at Oxford for this reference and also the next one.

² Russell Moore, head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, [noted](#) that "this ruling is a win, not only for those of us who are Christians, who hold to a pro-marriage, pro-family viewpoint, but also for all Americans, for freedom of conscience and freedom of speech." Moore is right. If the Court had ruled against Phillips, it would have sanctioned antagonistic and intolerant treatment of Christians who disagree with the culture on social issues. However, we need to note that the Court made its ruling on the basis of the Colorado Commission's hostility to Phillips's religious beliefs rather than the larger issue of anti-discrimination law and the free exercise of religion. Writing for the majority, Justice Kennedy stated, "The outcome of cases like this in other circumstances must await further elaboration in the courts, all in the context of recognizing that these disputes must be resolved with tolerance, without undue disrespect to sincere religious beliefs, and without subjecting gay persons to indignities when they seek goods and services in an open market."

³ When it comes to the press, how about The New York Times, where a while ago one of their writers, who had just interviewed a man who had gone forward at a Billy Graham Crusade, was reflecting on the fact that as a young man he had flirted with faith. But, after he looked at the John 3 passage – the one in which Nicodemus comes to faith – he said. It appeared to me that Jesus was calling Nicodemus to: 1) recognize his own insufficiency; 2) turn his back on his autonomy; and 3) be reborn as a human being who understands his dependence on something greater. He said he couldn't do it because that was a radical challenge to his freedom, and he wasn't giving up that.

⁴ Paul seems to suggest that we can lose our salvation. As you may know, there is a big debate about that. I do not think that is true, but some who sign up for the "once saved always saved camp," are misguided. Some use it to justify doing whatever they please. Those who argue for "eternal security" on the basis of the Bible do not claim that if we are saved we can do whatever we want to do, as much as they claim that if Christ has our heart he is going to reel us in. That he who began a good work in us will finish it.

⁵ Eugene Peterson paraphrases Galatians 5:1 this way: Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.

⁶ See: Leviticus 26:13, et al.

⁷ In the Gospels, Jesus invites people to take his yoke,⁷ promising that it is light and they will find "rest for their soul." The promise is, if we yoke up with Christ, he is going to do the heavy lifting.

⁸ And CS Lewis thinks that once they do this they will actually be harder to win back to the Gospel.

⁹ The term Law can be used in the OT to refer to the first five books. But sometimes it is the statutes – more specifically the Ten Commandments – that is being mentioned. In my devotional reading today – Psalm 119 – there was a lot of celebrating the statutes.

¹⁰ Enlightenment thought holds that we have the right to do whatever we want as long as it doesn't hurt someone else. John Stuart Mills famous definition is: The only freedom which deserves the name freedom is

that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to attain it.”

¹¹ Modern psychology offers a paradoxical and attractive kind of freedom – freedom from responsibility. My childhood trauma made me do it. My bad social trauma made me do it. My genes made me do it. My brain chemistry made me do it. These provide ideal escape routes from responsibility.

¹² Keller argues that this is also true of metaphysical reality. Some advocate for “no right, no wrong, no rules for me.” But the person who says this doesn’t ever get to experience a loving relationship – which however you define freedom, there is nothing more wonderful – dare I say nothing that feels as “freeing and liberating” as being in a loving relationship. But the minute you go there – the deeper it goes, the more intimate it becomes, the less freedom you have. Once you are committed to someone you can’t simply do whatever you want whenever you want to do it. There is someone else to consider. If both people say, I will adjust for you, I will modify my will, I will sacrifice for you. (Both have to say this or its exploitative). This is an enormous loss of freedom. Our modern cultural narrative is very limiting. Freedom has upsides, but if you make it an absolute, it doesn’t work.

¹³ The gravest threats to the free life do not come from the atheist or the secularist. They come from the quarter we might least suspect--from religion, particularly a former religion, a childhood religion, a neurotic religion. Living in the free air of freedom with its insecurities and chilling breezes, we are subject to sudden nostalgia for the warm, secure, swaddling clothes of earlier religion—little borrowings from the past, inconspicuous compromises with the environment: an Egyptian calf-god, a Judaistic circumcision, sentimentalized prayers, stereotyped emotions, formula explanations. Religious friends suggest or insist on ways to improve or correct or legitimize our life before God. We satisfy our need for security or admiration or relief from boredom. But these seemingly well-meaning additions or apparently inconsequential lapses gradually erode the base of freedom, reducing the space which Christ has made large in liberty. (Noel Coward once sent a picture post card of the Venus de Milo to a little girl and wrote across the bottom: “This is what will happen to you, if you don’t stop biting your fingernails.”) Eugene Peterson, Commentary on Galatians