

Getting Your Freedom Right

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us tonight to turn back to Galatians chapter 5, and I want to read again at verse 13. 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. All of you know that today we live in a culture where there are many different opinions and where often there are many big disagreements. And so all around us there are differences of opinion about politics, there's differences of opinion about taxes, about sexual ethics, about gender, about climate change, about immigration, about what we should spend our money on, about what the nation should prioritise. There's loads that we disagree on at the moment. But in amongst all of that disagreement, there is at least one thing that I think everybody still agrees on. Everybody wants freedom. So whatever people's views are on politics or culture or economics or climate change, everyone agrees that being free is a good thing. And that should be so exciting for us as Christians because one of the fundamental principles and privileges of the gospel is that Jesus sets you free. In other words, that means that at the core of our theology is the very thing that everybody around us wants. So if you are a Christian or if you become one, you have freedom. And this should be extra exciting for us here because the concept of freedom is in our name. We are Carloway Free Church and we are part of the Free Church of

Scotland. But the strange thing is that I'm pretty sure that if you went up to anybody in the street today and asked them whether they live in Lewis or if they live in Scotland, I'd say to them, where can I find freedom in Scotland, I doubt very much that their immediate answer would be in the free church or in any other church for that matter. And so for lots of people, they don't associate freedom with the claims of Christianity or with the church and everything that it stands for.

And maybe even more importantly, you might be sitting here as a Christian, maybe you've been a Christian for a long time, maybe you've been a member of the free church for a long time, and yet you're thinking, I don't feel very free. Because often we feel burdened, we feel restricted, we feel weak, limited, and trapped. Now part of that is because of the already not yet balance.

In the Christian's experience. We'll often refer to that, that the Christian's experience is often one of already and not yet. And that's a really important distinction to keep in mind, that as Christians already we enjoy so many privileges. Already you are safe as a child of God forever if you are trusting in Jesus. But we still live in a fallen world, we're still surrounded by brokenness, and we ourselves aren't fully fixed or sorted yet at all. And the full restoration of the new creation has not yet come. So at one level, the fact that we don't feel free and we feel burdened and trapped and restricted is because of that already not yet aspect of our theology. But at the same time, I think a key issue for many of us is that we don't have a clear and strong understanding of the freedom that the gospel gives us. We struggle to get our freedom right. And so that's our focus for this evening, getting our freedom right. And I'm going to think about it under two headings, getting our freedom wrong and getting our freedom right.

freedom is something, as we say, everybody in our society wants. But at the same time, I think that we can say that speaking at a kind of broad cultural level, first of all, it's something that I think that many, many people misunderstand. And our culture, I think, feeds us an inaccurate understanding of this whole concept of freedom. Because the huge mistake that people make is that we think that to be free is to be able to do whatever you like.

[4 : 41] Freedom means no restrictions, no external influences, no control. We can do whatever we want. And a great example of this came in the film Frozen, the Disney movie Frozen that, I suppose it's kind of an old film now, it's maybe 10 or 12 years old now or something. And there's a big famous song in that film called Let It Go, when Queen Elsa, she's the ice queen, so she can freeze everything. And all her life, she's been kind of holding back her powers so that she doesn't sort of let it show, doesn't sort of upset things, you know, by freezing stuff. And she's kind of like holding it in and holding it in. And then all of a sudden, she just lets it all go. And she's running away and she's freezing everything. And she's making ice castles and snowmen and snowdrifts and all this kind of stuff. And she's singing this song, Let It Go. And there's a line in the song where she says, no right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free. No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free.

And that's the idea that people have of freedom, that you can do whatever you want, no restriction, no rules. But that kind of idea of freedom is to misunderstand it completely.

Because that do whatever you like kind of freedom does not exist. It's a myth. And whatever your worldview, whether your worldview is a Christian worldview, or whether you have a different understanding of the world around you, that whether you think that, you know, the Bible's true, or whether you think it's not true, or partly true, or whatever, whatever your worldview, whatever the worldview of the people around us, nobody, absolutely nobody exists in a society or an environment where we can operate in total freedom. None of you can go into tomorrow morning and be like, oh, no rules for me. Can't walk into school and say that. You can't go to work.

You can't even drive a car and say that. Nobody can operate without boundaries or without external restriction or influence. In other words, no matter what your worldview is, there's always something bigger than you that you have to conform to. And so some people would have what we would call a naturalistic worldview. And that's the worldview that, you know, there's no supernatural. Everything is just natural. We're just part of this big closed box that is the universe. And there are just processes of genes and atoms and biology and chemistry and physics and all these things. And we're stuck.

We're slaves to that. And a lot of that's true in the sense that, you know, we say, ah, I can do what I like. There's a whole lot that we can't do because of the laws of physics and biology. Some people have a fatalistic worldview, the idea that there's something over us, something impersonal. There's fate.

[7 : 34] There's a force. And, well, we're powerless in the face of that because we're all under its control. Some people have what you call a pantheistic worldview where you see the world around you as a kind of divine being. And again, it controls us through karma and all that kind of stuff, things going right, things going wrong. And so even unbiblical worldviews still are trapped or still are forced into this view that there's something bigger than us. And the big thing is, is that that all these alternatives, I would want to argue, are so, I don't want to sound rude, but they're so rubbish compared to the God of the Bible, the absolute who is true and good and loving and wise.

And whatever our worldview, we always have to conform to the thing that's bigger than us. So the world around us is getting freedom wrong, and it's very important that we recognize that. But as Christians, we can also get our freedom wrong, and this is what I want us to focus on a little bit more.

And the trap that we can fall into as Christians is that we can sometimes think that, you know, Jesus has set us free. So that means that, well, you know, I can actually kind of just follow my own desires, and I can make my own decisions, and I can have things the way that I want them to be.

And Paul is warning the Galatians about this in chapter 5. He tells them, you are free, but don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. In other words, he's warning them, and he's teaching them and us that freedom is a privilege that can be misused. And that's a trap that Christians can very easily fall into. Now, all of this is pointing us towards two big categories of behavior that are constant dangers for disciples as we follow Jesus. And these are the big dangers of legalism and what we call antinomianism. Antinomianism. Okay. So, legalism is basically where you say you have to do stuff to either earn your salvation or to earn God's favor. And so, you need to keep certain rules either to become a Christian or you need to keep certain rules for God to love you, to like you, to accept you, to tolerate you. And so, it's all the idea that there's stuff you need to do, rules you need to keep, do's and don'ts that you must comply with. And then antinomianism is kind of at the other extreme where you're like, I can do what I like. I'm saved. Jesus has forgiven me.

God doesn't care what I do. And I can do whatever I like. And so, the word antinomian, nomos, is this nom bit. Nom is not food. Nom, nom, nom. It's nom as in the Greek word for law. And so, it's anti-lawism. And so, legalism is like loving the law and thinking it's all about the law.

[10 : 53] Anti-lawism, anti-nomianism is saying it doesn't matter what we do. Now, the context of Galatians was legalism because the Galatian Christians had been harassed by some Jewish teachers who'd come saying, oh yeah, you guys think you're Christians, but actually to be saved, you need to be circumcised.

You need to keep this law. So, that was a form of legalism. They had come to faith thinking, wow, we're saved. We're Gentiles, but we're saved. And then these other guys came in and said, oh no, no, no, no, Gentiles. It's not as simple as that. You need to keep this law. You need to be circumcised if you really want to be part of God's people. And Paul is writing this letter to say that that is totally wrong. And he's making it absolutely clear that obedience to the law is not the way that we're saved. And so, he says, look, we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. So, we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law, no one will be justified. And so, Paul is warning them about the dangers of legalism. And we always have to be really careful that we don't fall into the same trap. We can easily fall into the same type of legalism. It can happen in loads of ways. It can happen with things like, it can happen with church attendance. It can happen with what we do on a Sunday. It can happen with even clothes that we wear.

It can happen with our sense of duty, with our daily devotions, must pray, must read the Bible, things like that. And then, you always have to remember that all of those things are good things, but we can make a good thing a legalistic thing when we think that if I do more of this stuff, God will like me better. And it's so, so easy to fall into that trap. So, Paul's writing to these Galatians, warning them about legalism, but at the same time, he knows that there's an immediate danger that they could fall into another trap. And they could use the freedom that they have to think, I could do what I like. And many people have fallen into that trap. So, people think, I'm forgiven.

Doesn't matter what I do now. People think, I can decide what's right or wrong for myself. People can think, the Bible, things like Galatians, they were written for a different day. They don't really apply now. And perhaps most commonly of all, we can start picking and choosing which parts of the Bible we want to listen to. And it happens incredibly easily. And it even happens in the chapter that we read from, because you look at Galatians 5, it's an example of the lists of sins that God regards as unacceptable in the church. And we read a list like that, and we think, oh, yes, sexual immorality, that's horrific. And then we think to ourselves, well, fits of anger, well, we'll tolerate them.

And then we think, oh, divisions, actually, we quite like them. And you see how easy it is to fall into this trap of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible we want to listen to. And we must never use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. So, as Christians, we've got to be really on guard against getting our freedom wrong, guarding against this idea that, you know, as Christians, we just do what we like, and at the very same time, guarding against the whole threat of legalism as well. And I think the thing that we have to recognize when we're talking about legalism and antinomianism, it's easy to think, oh, some people are legalists, and some people are antinomians. So some people are thinking, oh, yeah, do this, do that, do the next thing. And some people are like, oh, yeah, do whatever you want. The reality is we're actually all a mixture of both. Because there's some areas of our lives where we'll have the strict approach of the legalist. It can happen in so many ways. It can happen so easily. We think, we must do this.

[14 : 57] And at the very same time, there can be other areas of our lives where we can just have the kind lax mindset of the antinomian, where we just know that there's maybe something in God's Word that's pricking our conscience, but we just think, ah, I'll ignore it, and I'll do it anyway.

The thing we need to recognize is that legalism and antinomianism both share the same posture. Because they both actually display an overconfidence in our own judgment.

Because the legalist is supremely confident in saying, you can't do this, you can do that. You shouldn't do this, you should do that. And if you don't do this, God won't be happy.

And that's placing a supreme confidence in our own judgment. But the antinomian is actually displaying the same posture, because the antinomian is saying, you can do what you like. And again, that's an overconfidence in our own judgment. And there's always a part of our hearts that's going to gravitate towards being overconfident in our own judgment and in our own opinion.

And this comes back to what we were saying this morning, that actually every part of our life needs to be shaped by grace. And so, the idea of the legalist, that you have to kind of earn your salvation or earn your favor with God, that is the opposite of grace.

[16 : 22] And I think one of the ways that we can fall into this trap so subtly is to think to yourself, you know, if you imagine today, right, some of you here have been at both services, which is amazing, and maybe some of you have even spent time in the afternoon reading your Bible.

Maybe you read a helpful book, a Christian book, and maybe you thought, I'm actually going to spend a bit of time in prayer. And so, you've been in church this morning, you've read something good in the afternoon, and you've come to church again tonight, and you go away thinking, actually, I think God will be pleased with me.

Or, the opposite, maybe you've missed church this morning, got along tonight, or maybe you haven't read anything for ages, or maybe you've just thought, you know, I'm here, but I'm kind of hanging in there and you think, God is going to be pretty disappointed with me, compared with how I've been previously in my life.

Neither of those things are ever true. You can do nothing to make God love you more, because you can do nothing to make Him love you less.

Because all of His love is based on His unchanging, eternal commitment to you, and His desire to show you grace. And that's like, well, I don't need to be a slave to all that legalistic requirement.

[17 : 54] But at the very same time, you realize, well, if that love is so great, and if God's commitment to me is so unshakable, I don't want to go through my life thinking, I'll do what I like.

I want to go through my life thinking, Lord, please guide me. Please lead me. Please help me listen to You. Because I want to be everything that You have made me to be.

And so grace reorients us back to what the gospel is all about. And it helps us to avoid the taps of legalism, which are one way of ruining our freedom, and avoid the taps of antinomianism, which is another way of ruining our freedom.

And instead, it points us to the amazing freedom that we have in the gospel. And so I want to think a little bit more about that under the heading, Getting Our Freedom Right.

The Bible's got a huge amount to say about freedom. And so the great Old Testament shadow of the gospel is the exodus. That's all about freedom. The Israelites are taken out of slavery, led into the promised land.

[19 : 03] They're free. Freedom lies at the heart of why Jesus came. We read that as our call to worship. Jesus says, if you abide in my word, you're my disciples, you'll know the truth. The truth will set you free.

And freedom lies at the heart of the message that both Jesus and we proclaim. He says, the Spirit of the Lord has appointed me because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed. And that's what we're saying. Liberty, freedom is at the very heart of the gospel.

Now, there is loads that we could say. And freedom is one of those topics that runs right through the whole Bible. There's loads that it says about it.

And so this is a topic where it's really helpful for us to approach it within the framework of what we would call systematic theology. Now, when we talk about systematic theology, it can sound a bit scary, but when we talk about systematic theology, all we mean is that we are wanting to try and summarize everything that the Bible says about a particular topic.

[20 : 06] So if you read a book about systematic theology, it'll go through all the big topics of Christianity, whether that's the doctrine of God or of Scripture or of sin or of salvation or of the end times or of the church or of who Jesus is.

You're just taking the big topics and looking at everything that the Bible says. So freedom is a great example of why systematic theology is so good. You think, right, I want to discover everything that the Bible says about this.

Now, at one level, we're not going to do that, but we're going to try, or we're going to certainly do as much as we can of that. And we're going to use a fantastic summary of the freedom that we have in the gospel that comes from the Westminster Confession of Faith.

So Westminster Confession of Faith, again, sounds really boring, written 400 years ago. Actually amazing. Such a brilliant book. It's really short, and it just gives a wonderful summary of some of the great truths of the gospel.

It has a chapter on Christian liberty and liberty of conscience, and the first paragraph in that chapter talks about the freedom that we have in Jesus.

[21 : 15] I'm going to read it, and we're going to think a wee bit about what it says. The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law, and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation, as also in their free access to God, and in their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but of childlike love and a willing mind, all which were coming also to believers under the law.

So that's the Old Testament. But under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law to which the Jewish church was subjected, and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free spirit of God than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.

Now, full paragraph. Loads of information in there. I want to say a little bit about all the statements in that paragraph as we go through them one by one, because if we want to understand our freedom, we need to understand what this paragraph is saying.

So it's got lots of things to tell us. Number one, it's telling us that you have freedom from the guilt of sin. You will be guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus.

And so this is so incredibly important. Every single time you feel guilty, you're being misled if you're a Christian.

[22 : 52] So if you're a Christian, or if you become a Christian, so often we feel guilty. We think, oh man, I've stuffed up. I'm useless. I'm not what I want to be. I'm so far from what I should be. Every time you think like that, you are being misled.

You are completely and forever free from guilt before God. That's how free you are.

We're told that we're free from the condemning wrath of God. There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Our sin condemns us. Our sin instantly leaves us liable to condemnation.

Jesus takes that sin away. And that means that forever and always, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Do you ever feel like God's annoyed with you? Do you ever feel like you're being accused by Satan, bringing to your mind all the things that you've done to let God down? Every time you think like that, you are being misled.

[23 : 59] If you're a Christian or you become a Christian, it is impossible for your sin to condemn you. Satan can try his utmost and it will have no effect.

You're free from the condemning wrath of God. That is how free you are. You're free from the curse of the moral law. Jesus has redeemed us, freed us from the curse by becoming a curse for us.

So you think of the moral law, you think of the Ten Commandments. One failure is one failure too many. One failure in the Ten Commandments puts you and me under the curse.

We become lawbreakers. We become sinners. One failure is one failure too many.

But now you're free. And that means that every time you think that you've blown it, you're wrong. That's how free you are because all the curse was placed on Jesus.

[25 : 15] We have freedom from this present evil world. We are one with Jesus. I think I've actually put the wrong verse up there.

Sorry, that was my mistake. We have freedom from this present evil world that we are not of the world is the verse that I meant to get from John 17. So sorry, I copied the wrong verse into the PowerPoint there.

If you look at the world around us, it's so full of mess. It's so full of brokenness. We get sucked into that and we make the same mistakes that the world around us makes and we get hurt by it. The way people treat us and speak to us bruises us and bashes us and the world that we live in feels so broken and it feels so cruel and it feels so harsh and it feels so rubbish.

You're free from it because your citizenship is somewhere else. You belong in heaven.

That's your new nationality. That's your new citizenship. That's where you belong. That's why you don't need to follow the crowd and every time you think that you have to keep in with the crowd, you're being misled.

[26 : 26] That's how free you are. We're free from this present evil world. You're free from bondage to Satan. Colossians 1 speaks of that.

Satan has absolutely no authority over you whatsoever if you're trusting in Jesus. So you feel like you're under spiritual attack. You feel like you're weak and you're exposed and like there's no light.

You feel attacked. But you are never, ever, ever under his grip. That's how free you are.

You're free from the dominion of sin. Sin will have no dominion over you. You're not under the law but under grace. So we are not helpless or hopeless in the face of sin anymore.

The Holy Spirit indwells us and empowers us to change. And so when Satan attacks you, when Satan tempts you, when Satan accuses you, I hope you don't mind me saying this but you can tell him to get lost because you are not under the dominion of sin anymore.

[27 : 31] It has no rule over you. And that of course is what Adam and Eve should have done in the first place when the devil came to them and said, oh, you need to eat this fruit to be like God. They should have said, get lost.

We're already like God. We're his image bearers. We don't need to listen to you. And all the time Satan is trying to attack us, trying to control us, trying to manipulate us and we can feel hopeless and powerless in front of him.

And if you feel hopeless and powerless, you're actually wrong because you're free from the dominion of sin. That's how free you are. We're free from the evil of afflictions.

1 Peter 4 says, Don't be surprised at the trial when it comes upon you to test you as though some strange thing was happening to you but rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings so that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

The key point here is that suffering gets redefined by the gospel. Without Jesus, suffering is just awful. And we're just exposed to just the awful, broken, rubbishness of a fallen world.

[28 : 32] But in Jesus, as we follow Jesus, we don't stop suffering. But our suffering gets redefined and it gets redefined in two ways. Well, maybe in more than two ways but two definite ways.

One is because it means that we can share in what Christ experienced for us. So we're sharing in his suffering. So when we're suffering, we're just getting a taste and a share of what he experienced so that we could be saved.

We're sharing in his sufferings. And the consequence of that is that your suffering hurts and is horrible but it's pushing you closer to him. And the hymn that we sometimes sing, Christ our hope in life and death, speaks of the waves that knock us and wash us closer to Jesus.

And there are many of you in here who are suffering. Physical pain and emotional pain and just stuff that's been so hard. The gospel redefines that in all of these things, Jesus, every knock you're getting is moving you closer to Jesus.

You're experiencing a little bit more of what he suffered for you. And that means that suffering is no longer just this awful thing that wrecks life. It can actually be the thing that refines you and builds you up because that's how free you are.

[30 : 01] You're free from the sting of death. You're free from the victory of the grave. It's the same verse I want to highlight. We are so often enslaved by the question, what happens when I die?

If you trust in Jesus, you are free to never worry about that question again.

I read a wonderful illustration of this recently in a book by Brian Chappell. He was talking about a friend of his whose wife had died and he was driving, I think, either to the funeral or away from the funeral with his children in the back.

And so their mom, his wife, had died. And they were waiting, they were driving in the car and they were stopped at a traffic light. And in front of them was a massive lorry and it was a sunny day. And so there was the lorry in front of them and the shadow of the lorry went down to the side, across the road and into the field beside them.

And the guy said to his children, he said, do you see that truck and its shadow? Would you rather get hit by the truck or by the shadow? And the wee child in the back said, by the shadow, because it can't hurt us.

[31 : 11] And he said, exactly. He said, Mammy has been hit by the shadow of death, not by death itself.

And she's safe with Jesus now. That's how free you are. Free from everlasting damnation. All the power of death, all the power of the devil has been destroyed and broken by the victory of the cross.

You're safe forever. That's how free you are. And now we have free access to God. And that's just the most astonishing privilege. I want you to think back to when the Ten Commandments were given at Exodus.

The people of Israel are at the bottom of the mountain. God comes to the top of the mountain in a fiery cloud. The mountain is shaking and the big messages do not even touch the mountain because sinners cannot come near God at all.

And if you want a picture of how inaccessible God is, you think, you go to Sinai and you see the mountain shaking and the people trembling and you cannot go near Him. And now, you can fall onto God's lap and be held in His arms forever and His Spirit dwells in you all because that's how free you are.

[32 : 38] And so we obey Him not out of fear but out of childlike love and a willing mind. And then the paragraph we read goes on to say, that was true in the Old Testament.

We've got even more privilege because now we're free from all the ceremonial law. We do not have to worry about all those burdens. And we've got greater access to the throne of grace.

We have boldness and access with confidence to come that tomorrow morning, tomorrow lunchtime, at work, at home, in bed, wherever you are, you can just run with boldness to Jesus and speak to Him and speak to your Heavenly Father and know that you're always welcome, always able to come.

That's how free you are. And now we enjoy fuller communications of God the Holy Spirit. So you think of the heroes of the faith, Moses, Samuel, David, Ruth, Rahab, Esther, you get more than they got of God the Holy Spirit because He's come to dwell in your heart.

And Paul writes about that, for this reason, I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven is named, that according to the riches of His glory, He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[34 : 03] we are constantly kind of harassed by doubts and fears and guilt and worry and feelings of inadequacy and a lack of self-worth and regret about the mistakes that we've made and all of these things feel like kind of ropes and chains binding us, weighing us down and every single time you think like that you are totally wrong because in Jesus you're free.

Free to enjoy His smile, His love, His presence, His peace and His never-ending commitment to you.

And so I want you this week to get your freedom right. I want you to wake up every morning and bask in your freedom. I want you to go into every day using your freedom.

I want you to go to bed every night this week resting in your freedom. And if you're not yet a Christian or if you're not sure if you think that becoming a Christian is going to be rubbish, it is not true because becoming a Christian is the coolest, best, most amazing and most wonderful thing that can ever happen to anybody.

It means that you're free and right now Jesus is saying look, let's just do it. Trust in me, follow me, I'll help you, let's go for it, it will be amazing and nothing needs to hold you back.

[35 : 45] Amen. Let's pray. Amen.