

What Is Freedom For?

Rich Nathan

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Galatians: Free At Last Series

Galatians 5:13-15

There is a great scene at the end of the movie, “Braveheart.” For those of you who never saw “Braveheart,” William Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, leads little bands of Scots in a guerilla war against the hated English. At the end of the movie, Wallace is betrayed by some Scottish nobles. He is beaten to the point of unconsciousness, handed over to the English, taken down to London and charged with high treason. He is told that if he confesses, his death will be quick and painless, but if not, he will be tortured. He refuses to confess, and so he is hanged, drawn, and quartered. The magistrate offers him a quick death, if he begs for mercy. But even at the end, Wallace will not be broken and instead of begging for mercy, he cries, “Freedom!” Wallace’s dying words – “Freedom!” – became the rallying cry of the Scots, and they defeat the English at Bannockburn.

Everybody talks about freedom – free trade, free enterprise, free markets. The Tea Party movement wants freedom from big government. There are the four famous freedoms announced by President Roosevelt in 1941 when he spoke about freedom of speech everywhere, freedom of worship everywhere, freedom from want everywhere, and freedom from fear everywhere.

As I said last week, many people don’t know that freedom is a great Christian word. Jesus described his own ministry in terms of freedom in his inaugural address in his home town of Nazareth. Here is what Jesus said:

Luke 4:18-19

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Paul’s ministry was all about freedom. As I mentioned last week, F.F. Bruce, the great New Testament scholar, summarized his life’s work on the Apostle Paul with a biography titled, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. But freedom is a tricky concept. How do we live free lives and not descend into total anarchy?

Have you ever gone to a city that is known for its freedom – like San Francisco or Amsterdam in the Netherlands? Or have you ever gone to an event or a rock festival where everyone is celebrating freedom? Have you ever been in a place where everyone and everything is about freedom? It can be a really unpleasant experience, at least if you aren’t high.

Walk down the street in Amsterdam, or walk through the Burning Man Festival, the annual event in north Nevada based on radical self-expression. You will be overwhelmed by the marijuana smoke. In cities that celebrate freedom, you will likely have very unpleasant encounters with aggressive panhandlers. You might be overwhelmed by the filth and the smell of urine permeating the air. You certainly don't want to take your kids to many of these freedom festivals because of the public sex and displays of nudity. Have you ever been to a public park where everyone is celebrating freedom? People have their boom-boxes out and you are assaulted with music of their choice.

We love freedom. But how do we practice freedom and still get along with each other? Or more personally, how do we practice freedom and not self-destruct?

You are a teenager and you've gotten your drivers' license. You say, "I have all this freedom." The question, of course, is, "What will I do with my freedom?" "Will I wear my seatbelt? Drive responsibly? Or will I drink a few beers and drag race down the highway?"

You are a prisoner recently released from jail. You say, "Okay, now I'm free." The question is, "What will you do with your freedom?" Will you say, "I will get a job and work hard. I'm going to be a productive citizen." Or will you go back to your habits, hanging out in your old neighborhood, hanging out with old friends.

You find yourself alone in a strange city for a week where you are totally anonymous. What do you do with your time? Who are you and what do you do when no one is looking? How do you handle your freedom? Or maybe you're retired with tons of free time. How do you spend it? What do you invest in?

I've been doing a series from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians that I've titled "Free At Last." As I've mentioned, freedom is the theme that runs through the book of Galatians. But in today's text, the Apostle Paul begins to deal with the question that forms our title, "What Is Freedom For?" Let's pray.

Galatians 5:13-15

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Throughout the book of Galatians, Paul runs through a list of things that followers of Christ are set free from.

What are we set free from?

Notice some of the things that Paul tells us we're free from. We are free from this present evil age.

Galatians 1:3-4

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

We are free from having to follow Jewish customs like circumcision.

Galatians 2:3

Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.

Galatians 2:14

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

We are free from the curse of the law. In other words, we are free from God's judgment on us for breaking his law.

Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole."

We are free from the supervision and tyranny of the law.

Galatians 3:24-25

So the law was put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

We are free from having distinctions made in the church based on our race, our ethnic background, our gender, or our economic situation.

Galatians 3:28-29

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Christ came to set us free from idols and all that is not God.

Galatians 4:8

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

And in the words of the great Bible teacher, John Stott, we are freed from our puny little selves.

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Now, we might classify all of these things under the title “negative freedom” – things we are free from. Because Christ has come, we are released from fearing the future, from condemnation when we stand before God in judgment. We can be set free from guilt over yesterday’s mistakes and yesterday’s omissions. We can be set free from fear over what will happen to us tomorrow.

And let me say something about tomorrow. If you are a Christian, you never need to be afraid about tomorrow. I mean if the worst thing happens to you tomorrow – you are killed in an accident and you die – then you know the best thing will happen to you tomorrow. You will be transported instantly into the presence of Jesus Christ. We Christians are set free from our fear of death.

Now, the modern world entirely defines freedom in a negative sense. There is, of course, no reference to what Christ has done. But the modern world essentially defines freedom as freedom from restraint. Or to put it more simply, the modern world defines freedom as freedom to do whatever I want to do. It is the attitude of the typical teenager or young adult: “I’m 18 and I can do whatever I please. No one is going to tell me what to do.” “I’m 21. And even though you still pay most of my bills, mom and dad, I’m going to do what I want. I’m free!”

And the modern world defines freedom as essentially freedom from any restraints. We are free from outside restraints, from any outside inhibition, anyone telling us what we should do, so long as we’re not breaking the law. Now, what are the problems with defining freedom only in terms of negative freedom – being free to do whatever we want to do?

What are the problems with negative freedom

What is the problem with this idea of freedom – freedom to do whatever we want? Let me suggest a few problems. What if what I want is wrong or self-destructive?

What if what I want is wrong or self-destructive?

On what basis can anyone be challenged about any decision they make because every decision is protected by this absolute defense called freedom. How do you ever say to someone, “I don’t think that you ought to do this or that?” I think dating that person is really a bad move. They aren’t. You are a follower of Christ and so you are going

outside of God's will in your dating. And I think it is going to end up hurting you. On what basis can we challenge someone else, or be challenged, if we simply assert freedom?

I remember watching an old "Friends" episode some years ago. If you've never seen the show, it is about 6 young adults who have no visible means of support other than working part time at a coffee shop. Yet they live in these great apartments in New York City. Anyway, in one particular episode, Phoebe, who is unmarried, decides that she wants to get pregnant and become a surrogate mom. And one of the guys on the show, Ross, challenges her decision and she just lets him have it: "Why can't you just support me? What can't you just be my friend? It's my decision. I don't need your criticism or your judgment." And, of course, Ross folds like a cheap suit and the rest of the group of friends rallies around Phoebe to support her decision. Because she is free to do what she wants to do!

Freedom in the contemporary world is the ultimate trump card that keeps everyone of us from being challenged or critiqued or confronted about anything we do or any decision we make. "Hey, it's my body, I will do with it what I please. It is your job to support me, if you're my friend." "It's my life. If I want to marry this person, if I want to quit my job, if I want to walk away from my marriage, if I want to walk away from my children – it is my life. It is my free choice! So I can do things that God says he hates. Or, I can choose things that will ultimately destroy me and you have no right to challenge me."

Have you ever tried to challenge someone about a decision who didn't reject your argument, they rejected your rights to challenge them at all? "Hey, I'm free! Who are you to call me on my choices?"

What are the problems with negative freedom, simply defining freedom as freedom from any restraint, freedom to do whatever I want?

What if what I want conflicts with what others want?

I talked about this in the introduction. What if I want to play my 150 watt car stereo at level 10 and the other cars in back of me would like to be free from being vibrated from the shock of the sound waves? Or what if someone just wanted to have a nice quiet picnic with their family without being assaulted by my freedom to play a song full of curse words and sleaze about women?

What if what I want conflicts with what other people want? What if your kids want a dad in their home and you want to walk away? Or mom, you push dad away and you want to take up with another man? That's your freedom, right? Walking away from promises, leaving employers in the lurch, laying off employees to puff up the company's bottom line, walking away from commitments to people who rely on me in the church – Hey, that's your freedom!

The problem with negative freedom is what if what you want conflicts with what other people want?

What if I don't know what I want?

I mean, its not like my heart is all that simple, or your heart is all that simple. You look inside and you are going to find a lot of conflicting desires and a lot of conflicting wants. You may want to smoke and you probably want to live a long time, or at least not die of lung cancer and emphysema. I want to eat everything in sight, but I also don't want to get fat. You may want to have the sexual freedom to explore multiple sexual relationships, but you also may want to have a committed companion with whom you can grow old based on years of love and trust.

The freedom to do whatever you want breaks down because lots of times we don't know what we want. Or what we desire is in conflict with other desires.

Let me reduce this to its simplest element. Most people want to be happy. And if you watch the shopping network, you know that the secret to happiness is buying a 75-piece knife set, an abs-cruncher and a blanket with holes that you can put your arms through. Have you ever met someone who has spent their whole life making decisions that they think will move them to happiness and never does? Have you ever met someone like that?

There is a young Christian woman who meets a cute guy at work. Because she is free, she decides she is going to date him even though he is not a Christian, because it will make her happy. He never talks about marriage, so she decides because she is free that she will move in with him. Maybe that will make her happy and him happy. And even through she knows she shouldn't have sex with him, well, that's her choice and it made him happy and it made her feel loved. And then she discovered that she's pregnant. So they decide that they're going to get married – "Maybe marriage will make us happy. Maybe we'll borrow a lot of money to buy an SUV and we'll borrow even more money to purchase a home that we can't afford. And we'll put even more debt on our credit cards because that will make us happy."

If freedom is simply the ability to do whatever I want, what if I don't even know what I want? What if what I want never gets me to the place I want to get to which is to be happy?

Have you ever gone hard after happiness, thinking certain choices would make you happy and found yourself really unhappy?

And finally:

What if what I want will destroy my freedom?

Look what the Apostle Paul says in verse 13:

Galatians 5:13

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

Now Paul is all for freedom. Galatians is all about freedom. But he is also concerned about preserving freedom. You see, there is only one absolutely free being in the universe – God! There is ultimately only one being who is free to do whatever he pleases – God!

Psalm 115:3

Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

All the rest of us are limited and contingent – dependent on a million things that we can't control like the weather, the economy, our health, other people's choices, and God's will. And when we try to exercise the unrestrained freedom of God as creatures, we end up destroying ourselves. The Apostle Paul says in verse 13,

Galatians 5:13

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

That word “indulge” was originally a military term. It meant the “starting point of the base of operations for an expedition.” When we send out military into a place, we first build a base, a staging ground, for an assault. Paul says that when you abuse your freedom, when you just do whatever you want without regard to what God says or what's best for others, you are creating in your inner being a staging ground, a base of operations, for an assault. An assault by what? The TNIV and the NIV used the term “sinful nature.” Older versions use Paul's word, “the flesh.” When we just do what we want, we are giving ground in our lives to the flesh. What is the “flesh”? Let me quote from William Barclay, an old Bible scholar. Please forgive the lack of gender inclusiveness here.

The flesh is what man has made himself in contrast with man as God made him. The flesh is man as he has allowed himself to become in contrast to man as God meant him to be. The flesh stands for the total effect upon man of his own sin and of the sins of his fathers and of the sin of all men who have gone before him. The flesh is human nature as it has become through sin... the flesh stands for human nature weakened, vitiated, tainted by sin. The flesh is man as he is apart from Jesus Christ and his Spirit.

Here is the problem. The problem is that the more you indulge yourself and go after everything your heart wants, without restraint, without regard to God or the best interest of others, the more you can find yourself taken captive by your own desires. To put it all in a nutshell, when you go whole hog after freedom – freedom to eat whatever you want, the freedom to drink whatever you want, the freedom to sleep with whomever you

want, the freedom to ingest whatever drugs you want, the freedom to work as many hours as you want, the freedom to exercise as much as you want, or shop as much as you want, or play computer games as much as you want, you are going to find yourself to be an addict. Only God can handle unrestrained freedom. The rest of us? We end up of slaves taken captive by our own flesh.

So we need a fuller definition of freedom than being free to do whatever I want, or whatever my heart sets itself on. In other words, we need something more than negative freedom – freedom from. We need positive freedom. And here is where Paul helps us so much. He says we need to ask the question, “What are we set free for?”

What are we set free for?

This is positive freedom:

Galatians 5:13-14

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

In 1970 Michael Ramsey, who was then the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, preached a series of four Cambridge University sermons which were subsequently published under the title, *Freedom, Faith and the Future*. In it, he first posed the question, “We know what we want to free men from. Do we know what we want to free me for?” He went on to answer his own question. He said:

We speak a great deal about freedom from persecution and arbitrary imprisonment, crippling hunger, and poverty. But we need to speak in the context of the more radical revolutionary issue of freeing man from himself for the glory of God.

What are we free for? God sent his son into the world to free us to be the people he created us to be. He wants to liberate us from everything that keeps us from being everything he made us to be. Paul says what we’re made to be first of all is servants of God and secondly servants of each other.

Let me give you a picture here. You’ve got a fish in one of those old glass bowls swimming in circles. The fish says to himself, “You know, I want to be free – free from the constraint of this bowl, free to travel where I want, when I want and how I want. And so one day the fish decides to leap out of the bowl and ends up on the living room floor, flapping around, gasping for air, and dies. There is an environment in which fish live and flourish, that environment is water. There is likewise an environment in which freedom lives and flourishes.

In what environment does freedom flourish?

Freedom flourishes in a relationship with God

See, here's the deal. Freedom is not a gift that we can take from God and say, "Thank you, I'll see you later and I will do with this gift of freedom whatever I please." We are most free when we are in close connection with and close touch with God. And when we turn our back on God and move away from him, we find ourselves enslaved even though we're running after freedom.

Now this is the message of the whole Bible. Whenever God's people leave relationship with God in some quest for freedom – "I don't care what God says, I'm going to date who I want." "I don't care what God says, I'm going to get divorced, if I want." "I don't care what God says, I'm going to get an abortion, if I want." "I don't care what God says, I'm going to look at pornography, if I want" – whenever we turn our backs on God and leap for freedom like that fish, we find ourselves on the floor gasping and dying. Have you ever found yourself in this position? You leapt for freedom and ended up on the floor gasping for air and dying?

In the book of Judges, the Israelites were brought into the Promised Land by God. And God offered them freedom so long as they kept their covenant with him. So for as long as they obeyed God's word, they would be free. But if they left the Lord they would be enslaved. What happened?

Judges 2:12-14

They forsook the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the LORD's anger 13 because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. 14 In his anger against Israel the LORD gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.

Now throughout the whole history of the Old Testament we find God's people turning their backs on him and they become enslaved to the Assyrians, to the Babylonians, to the Persians. Freedom flourishes in a relationship with God. Friend, only when you do the counter-intuitive move – when you say, "I'm going to reject the illusion of total freedom, just going after whatever my heart wants in this moment, I'm going to, by faith, obey God in this situation." – will you find that the result of your obedience is greater freedom. Freedom flourishes in a relationship with God.

Freedom flourishes in an atmosphere of love

Marcus West wrote a wonderful book 50 years ago titled, *Children of the Sun*. He tells the story of abandoned street children in Naples and how a Catholic priest named Father Mario takes care of them. West writes this:

There is one thing about us (that is Neapolitans) that never changes. We have need of love as fish has need of water, as a bird has need of air.

He went on to explain that every one of these street children had left home because there was no longer any love for them in their homes.

A fish can breathe in water. We human beings can only really live and breathe in an atmosphere of love. We die when we neglect the love of our families or our church and rush out after freedom.

Mother Teresa once said:

Even the rich are hungry for love, for being cared for, for being wanted, for having someone to call their own.

She went on to say:

Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat.

A Roman Catholic poet once said,

Not when I breathe, but when I love, I live.

The environment in which human beings flourish is an environment of love. And the environment in which freedom flourishes is an environment of love. Because as I love other people and as I receive love, I become more of the person God intended me to be. I am free for God's purpose.

So what is love?

What is love?

Paul tells us first of all:

Love is not selfish

Galatians 5:13

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

We so often misuse the word "love" to cover our desire for self-indulgence. "I love you; let's sleep together." We really mean, "I lust you' let's sleep together." "I love myself; let's sleep together." Love is not self-indulgent.

Love is not a feeling

The Apostle Paul makes love very practical. He says:

Galatians 5:13

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

In an epistle devoted to freedom, this word “serve,” which literally means “be enslaved to one another,” is like a choker collar pulling us up short. We are walking down the path like dogs. We’re free. And suddenly, we get jerked by this word “serve” – “be enslaved to one another.”

In the 1st century Greco Roman world that Paul was writing to, this word “serve” would have been a slap in the face because if the Greeks believed anything it was that a free man was the very opposite of a slave. Freedom and slavery. These two things are utterly incompatible. But Paul brings them together. He says that you are entirely free before God. You have free access to the throne of God. Freedom to express all that’s on your heart to God. You are free from guilt. You are free from the powers. You are free from being controlled by idols. You are free from the burden of the law. You are free from all the ceremonies of the Old Testament. You are free from your puny little selves.

Now you are free to practically love another person through acts of service.

What would the Apostle Paul say to a retired person or someone contemplating retirement? He would say, “Now that you are free from the burden of having to work 40-50-60 hours a week to earn a salary, don’t use your freedom to indulge yourself. Don’t play golf four times a week, play once a week and spend the time in a role that maximizes your contribution to other people’s well-being.”

One of our retired couples spent several dozen hours a week pursuing their lifelong passion which was to see people get well. They organized prayer teams here in the church and spent hours praying for the sick and counseling those whose hearts needed healing. Another of our retired couples spent a couple of days a week here at the church volunteering in kids’ ministry because they love children. Another couple who is retired is getting trained to care for missionaries who are out of the field. They plan to travel to mission bases to bring encouragement and counsel and care for the individuals, marriages and families of missionaries who are scattered around the world. One of my friends who is retiring is making plans to develop social businesses that will provide jobs and services for people who are unemployed. Another retired friend is an architect who designs the building projects around this church.

Love is not a feeling. It is very practical. It involves serving others and promoting the wellbeing of someone other than ourselves.

And Paul's paradoxical statement about freedom and service was repeated centuries later by the father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, in his treatise called, "The Freedom of a Christian," when he said:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

We're free before God. We rule over every power. We can always access God freely. And yet, we exist to serve others; not serve ourselves.

Finally:

Love is not lawless

The Apostle Paul says in verse 14:

Galatians 5:14

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Not only do we set freedom and service against one another, we set love and law as polar opposite. We see law as restrictive, rule-keeping, Puritanical, dull as dishwater, deadening. Love, on the other hand is spontaneous, alive, permissive, open, tolerant, welcoming. Paul says that the entire law is fulfilled, the entire law is summed up, literally, in this command: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love

Honor your father and mother
Do not murder
Do not commit adultery
Do not steal
Do not lie
Do not covet

We, Americans, when we want to add, we have a column of numbers and we put a line under that column and then we put the sum under the line. However, the Greeks used to literally sum up. They put the sum above the line. Paul says if you want to sum up the law, the whole law of God as it concerns our fellow man, it is all summed up in this statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. Here's the idea. You and I are set free from all of these different things that held us captive – guilt over the past, fear regarding the future, powers too strong for us, our puny little selves. We are set free for love.

How do I know if I'm acting in love towards you? I know what love isn't. Love isn't lawless. If I lie about you or to you, I am not loving you. If I steal from you, I steal your reputation, I steal your good name, steal your possessions, or steal your girlfriend, that

is not love. Adultery can never be loving. Wanting what you have – your position, praise that belongs to you, your possessions. If I want to grab what you have, that can't be love.

What is the standard of love?

Paul tells us in verse 14:

Galatians 5:14

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

I know if I violate the commandments, I am not loving. Now love is more than law-keeping. But it's never less. I need to go beyond not stealing, not lying, not coveting, but I can't do less than that. But positively there is a rough and ready guide for figuring out in every situation what love looks like. And the rough and ready guide that should determine how you and I act in every situation is this: Treat people the way you want to be treated. You don't want to be lied to, then don't lie to others. You don't want your stuff stolen, then don't steal other people's stuff. You don't want your marital vows broken, then don't break your vows. You want to be listened to, complimented, recognized when you do a good job, understood, assisted, and affirmed, then listen to others. Compliment them when they do a good job. Affirm opinions other than your own. Acknowledge success. Praise and thank people because you want to be praised and thanked.

Freedom flourishes in an environment of love. And you know what love is. It is what you want to have happen to you. Do so to others. Let's pray.

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