

**Sermon preached by Mr. Nathanael de Poix at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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FREED TO LOVE

Galatians 5:1-15

I am well aware that I still owe you the second part of the series on Spiritual Warfare that I started back in March. And you will get it – just not today. There’s something else that’s been on my heart that I’m *excited* to share with you this morning.

This morning we will look at the incredible gifts of love and grace, as Paul brings to light in his letter to the churches in Galatia – specifically the first 15 verses of chapter 5.

I want to remind everyone that **grace** is *God’s goodness toward those who deserve only punishment.*ⁱ

Francois Fenelon has to be one of my favorite saints of old. Fenelon, as he is commonly called, was a French Roman Catholic, theologian, poet and writer. At the tender age of 12 Fenelon studied philosophy and rhetoric at the university level. After expressing the desire for a career in the church, Fenelon began studying theology. He was so gifted, that he was asked to give his first public sermon at the age of 15!

I share all of this with you to give you some background on a spiritual giant whose writings have had a profound impact on my life. Fenelon made it a point to challenge his readers to throw off everything that hinders, and surrender to God wholeheartedly. You will hear me quote Fenelon many times in the years to come, and I thought it would be helpful to give you a little history.

Fenelon asks this of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ: *To just read the Bible, attend church, and avoid “big” sins – is this passionate, wholehearted love for God?*

Well friends...is it?

It has only been in the past few years that I’ve just *begun* to grasp the outrageousness of God’s grace. Why is it so hard to believe? For one, it doesn’t help that much of what we have learned in our culture is contrary to the idea of being free. “Nothing in life is free,” *right?* Nothing!

Then we come into the presence of the Almighty God of the Universe and hear that the greatest gift of all – this wonderful thing called *grace* – is free. No strings attached.

We also have to overcome the religious legalists. Similar to the Judaizers of the Apostle Paul’s day, there are legalists in our churches that are doing everything they can to ensure that our liberty – this grace in Christ – is kept hush-hush. They fear that if God’s people catch wind of this freedom, that all hell will break loose in churches.

This morning I’m going to teach from Galatians 5 as we look to see how love and grace come together in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 5, verse 1:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

God does not want his people to be slaves – forced to give the *appearance* that they love and worship Him. Christ paid the ultimate price – death on the cross – so that you and I might be free. Christ died to cover *all* of our sins yesterday, today and forever. *Amen?*

Many of us go through life with the fear of rejection. Rejection from our parents, our friends, colleagues, maybe even spouses. We try not to upset anyone for fear of losing their approval.

Some of us may picture God as an angry parent, keeping a tab on all our faults and follies, just waiting to deliver punishment when we mess up. We fear that when we mess up – as we all do – He’s going to reject us.

Some of us may take on the mentality that we have to earn God’s love. Like if you can just make it to church Sunday morning, God’s going to give you a big “check” on your spiritual assessment sheet for the week. If you make it to small group or a Bible study, or lend a hand to someone in need, you’ll get a “check +”. You can even get the elusive and coveted “check ++” if you make it to a prayer meeting!

A lot of people live under the fallacy that we can earn salvation, and then consequently, work to keep it. When I was a child I pictured God sitting up in heaven counting the spankings one by one He would be delivering, once it was my turn to stand before Him in the “judgment line”. Like the ones I got down here weren’t enough. Yeah, I know...*crazy*...spankings in heaven?

Nevertheless, this is where many of us find ourselves. We picture a vicious, more humanistic, vengeful system in Heaven, where God is divvying out *His* love depending on *our* behavior. If this were the case, His favor would obviously sway towards those who do the most stuff for Him. But praise Him, it’s not the case!

As I mentioned earlier, it has only been in the past few years that I am finally *just* beginning to grasp the incredible *free* gifts of love, grace, and mercy as lavished on us from a perfect and holy God. *God longs for His children to feel secure and free in their relationships with Him.*

All of you parents out there: Do you want your kids having to earn security in your relationship with them? Do you want them wondering whether or not you love them? Of course not. In the same manner God wants His children to be free to enjoy a loving relationship with Him. A relationship steeped in a love that far outweighs anything we can experience even in our familial relationships.

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him! Matthew 7, verse 11

God loves you and me unconditionally. Praise His glorious name He does *not* keep a system of checks and balances when it comes to showering us with mercy, compassion and grace.

Fenelon says, “We are so wretched in our sinfulness that nothing else can ever save us except His mercy.”

Isaiah 64:6 says, *all [of] our righteous acts are like filthy rags.* Are we getting the picture here?

Our human efforts could never outweigh our sins and desperate need for grace.

Returning to today's text:

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.

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

During his first missionary journey, Paul preaches and establishes churches in the large Roman region of Galatia, in Asia Minor. However, once Paul left the territory, some Jewish-Christians arrived accusing the Galatians and criticizing the teachings of Paul saying that the Galatians needed to submit to Jewish laws and customs.

In other words, salvation *wasn't* enough. These false teachers were imposing this *yoke of slavery* – or “the keeping of the laws” – draped over the shoulders of Christians.

But Paul was very clear in opposing any ideas that called a believer to have to *earn* their salvation.

Paul's telling us in verse 2 that if you allow yourself to be sucked in to this false teaching of having to work your way to freedom, Christ Jesus Himself will be of no value to you.

The word *value* used in this translation (NIV) comes from the Greek word $\square\phi\epsilon\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ (*ōphelēō*), which also means profit, useful, or advantageous.

In other words, Christ's work in being nailed and murdered on the cross to free you from the law, actually gains You *nothing* – *it's worthless to you* – if you are trying to work out your salvation on your own.

If you can keep the law perfectly – which the Old Testament demonstrates that no one can – then there's no need for Christ in your life. You can be your own Savior.

Friends, to have this freedom in Christ and to enjoy a loving relationship with God, all we need is Christ. *Christ + nothing*. That is how we attain true freedom. When we start adding to the equation, however: Christ + making it to Communion Sunday each month; Christ + dressing a certain way when you come to church; Christ + having a 15 minute devotion every morning at 6:15; we take away from the freedom that we have in Jesus.

We have to choose one way or the other. It's either all about your works and what you do, or it's all about Jesus and what He did on the cross.

3 Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. 4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.

Paul continues to pour it on here. We have to make a decision. We can either keep the law and work our way in to heaven, *or* let Jesus' work on the cross cover us. It's either our works or receiving His mercy and grace.

In verse 4 Paul states that if you are trying to earn your own salvation, you are not in true relationship with Christ. For you have denied the faith, as it is built on grace.

Verse 6:

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

Friends, commit verse 6 to memory. Repeat after me: *The only thing that counts...is faith expressing itself through love.*

God is looking down on us right now. What do you think He's most concerned with? Do you think it's your outfit? What time you arrived here this morning? Whether or not you're taking notes on this sermon right now? For your sake I hope you are taking notes, they'll be a test immediately following the sermon. Don't worry, it's multiple choice...

Friends, it's not about what you know; it's about Who you know.

What matters most to God is that you love Him. This isn't what I believe, Jesus said so! Jesus is asked, *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment".* (Matthew 22:36-38)

The Lord longs to know that you're here this morning as an expression of love and with a heart of worship. God wants to know you're here because you're in a passionate relationship with Him and *want* to honor Him with your life. You're singing praises to Him out of love; not obligation.

His love must be unconditional, because He's the only one I know that might actually take joy in *my* singing! *Amen* from all of you that have been stuck in the pew behind me during praise songs.

Verses 7-10:

7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? 8 That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 9 A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. 10 I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be.

Paul's asking the Galatians, "What's going on here? You were doing great. Who's responsible for teaching you all this false junk – that your salvation is dependent upon upholding the law?"

In Matthew Chapter 16 (verses 6; 12), Jesus also refers to the yeast of the Jewish teachers.

6 "Be careful,"(Jesus said to them.) "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." This *yeast* refers to the false doctrine being taught by religious leaders.

Regardless of who these false teachers are, Paul makes it very clear that they will have a penalty to pay for lying and deceiving the people.

I want to take a moment to share something I believe we all need to hear: We, as Christians, need to stand up for our faith. You either believe in the entirety of the Bible as God's inerrant, Holy Word...or you don't.

We have to live in the most tolerant culture to date: "Don't say anything that's going to offend anyone – especially if it has to do with religion!" "Jesus is the only way? Isn't that a little narrow-minded?"

Actually yes, it is narrow...and it's the Truth. Was it not our Savior Jesus Who said?

13 "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matt. 7:13-14)

We need to learn to stand up for beliefs that are unpopular in our culture and teach the *whole* Truth. God doesn't ask us to agree with Him or to make sure we feel good about His desires and commands. He's God. He calls the shots.

Some preachers and teachers out there have built ministries on preaching what's popular. They preach that God is most concerned with your happiness. The truth is God is most concerned with where your heart is.

At Faith and Redeemer Churches we preach the Truth. And sometimes the Truth is difficult to hear, and it's not always easy to teach. But like the Good Surgeon, the Lord is constantly at work – uncovering the disease-ridden areas that are hindering our spiritual lives and going to work.

I have to remind myself that I'm not here to win a popularity contest. That's hard for me because I can be a people-pleaser to a fault. I'm here to teach the Word of God, and to do my best in light of God's grace to live it out in my life.

We have all had opportunities to speak truth into peoples' lives, but instead, let the moment slip by, out of fear of not wanting to offend anyone; or out of fear of being rejected; or out of fear of becoming unpopular.

But God has called us and given us the gift of opportunity in having an active role in getting His message of love and grace out into the world. *Amen?*

Returning to today's text, Galatians 5, verse 11:

Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

Here we can see that Paul is being attacked for preaching salvation by grace alone. Paul is *not* winning the popularity contest.

We can also tell from the context of this passage that Paul is being accused of still preaching the old message as he did in his "pre-Damascus Road days" – the message of "salvation by law-keeping". Paul refutes this by saying, "Hey people, obviously I'm preaching salvation by the Cross. If I were still teaching salvation by works, I wouldn't be under persecution!"

As followers of Christ we can act aloof or dodge certain “hot-button” topics, such as when our friends and neighbors are talking about various ways to heaven, but that’s not what Christ has called us to do.

When I began to rekindle my relationship with the Lord a number of years ago, I was attending two churches and two small groups. I wanted to absorb as much of God and His people as I could. One of my small group leaders confronted me with some sin I had going on in my life. He took it as far as to say that because of my continuance in this sin that he didn’t think I was a Christian. That was the gentle version. Truth-be-told, the Bible beating went on for quite some time. I was hurt. I even began to question my salvation! Part of my problem is that up until that point, I had not yet been convicted that I was sinning in this area.

I was really hurt. Was that the best way to confront sin in a person’s life? I don’t know. It’s what God used to open my eyes. The Good Surgeon graciously uses his people to deliver the news and sometimes even uses them to bring healing to the unhealthy.

However, the Bible tells us that we must speak into peoples’ lives gently and respectfully. Greg Koukl, professor at Biola University and president of *Stand to Reason*; an organization whose mission is to “equip Christian ambassadors with knowledge, wisdom, and character” says this to his students in lecture:

“The Gospel is offensive enough, don’t add anything to it!”

Friends, we are called to tell others of the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth. But *all* we are called to do is share the Word of God, and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. *AMEN?*

People will be offended, and even upset with you on occasion. I might have already offended someone even now...

Back to Galatians 5, Verse 12:

As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

You have to appreciate Paul’s sarcasm here. He’s so frustrated with the law-followers and their hardened hearts. Most notably, the lies and requirements they are filling God’s people’s heads with.

It is wrong to add *anything* to the Gospel of God’s grace. It is wrong to require anything more for God’s children to enjoy a relationship with Him, than to receive His grace in accepting a relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ + nothing.

The Bible is full of individuals like Paul who stood up for the Truth of God’s Word. My prayer is that you might join them and stand up for God. Not out of fear or legalism, but because you *want* to stand with God. (Chan)

Verse 13,

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

Friends, you are a free people. Your freedom was bought on the cross. But Paul says don't use this freedom to do whatever you want, instead, *serve one another in love*.

Verse 14,

The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

God's using the pen of Paul to say to us, "Yes, you are indeed free, but would you use this freedom to love others?" The *whole law* is summed up in this – *Love your neighbor as yourself*. We know this as the second greatest commandment as stated by Jesus.

The Lord says, "Love others. Treat them like you would want to be treated. Put their needs and desires *before* yours."

What was great about the early church as recorded in Acts was that no one was in need. They took care of each other: You need money for rent? I've got two cars, I'm going to sell one and help you make rent. The people weren't freeloaders, mooching off others. The Bible also teaches, *if a man will not work, he shall not eat*. (2 Thessalonians 3:10)

It was this contagious idea of love in the early church that held the community together, and still has the power to do so today. A community of God's people sharing and serving one another. "Hey, you need to borrow my car? No problem." "Let me take you out to eat." *This, is faith expressing itself through love*.

The problem is that we live in an independent, individualistic society. "I don't come to church to hang out and make friends. I'm here to get my weekly dosage of 'Jesus said' and jet."

We've all heard the "Love your neighbor as yourself" command more than 1,000 times. Some of us may even be numb to it. Question: What's going to be different this time around? Here's a hint: The difference will be evident in where you go from here.

Some of us have reached a comfort level in our relationships with Christ, that we aren't necessarily even aware that our spiritual growth might be prematurely at a standstill.

I admit to you today, that when I wake up in the morning, I'm often the first thing on my mind. I have a feeling you might be able to relate. Loving my neighbor is *not* usually the first thing on the brain when the alarm goes off.

Scripture says: *We love because He first loved us*. (1 John 4:19) It's when we are so overwhelmed with the love of God, that we are then able to pour out this love into the lives of those around us.

To return to Fenelon's question from earlier:

To just read the Bible, attend church, and avoid "big" sins – is this passionate, wholehearted love for God?

No...it's not...I know you knew the answer already. But how often do we get caught in the snare of wanting to focus on our own self-righteousness instead of focusing on loving God and others?

Verse 15,

If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Some Christians' interactions with others are tainted by their own self-righteousness; their motives are not pure. They want to impose "Christian" rules and regulations on the community. And when a brother or sister falls short of *their* expectations – maybe even sins – they are right there to point out their folly every time. As if to kick a man already down. God has forgiven them, but the Christian is not always as merciful.

How can we keep grace and peace in the church when we can't put our own motives and pride aside? What happens when opinions on doctrine – especially what we refer to here as non-essentials – actually drive believers apart? On a larger scale, what happens when one denomination denounces another? I'll tell you what happens. The unity of the Spirit that we are called to maintain is demolished. *This is the antithesis of unity in love, and it drastically hinders our witness to the Gospel.*

All interactions with everyone – especially other Christians – must be done out of and, in love – with the other person's well-being actually overshadowing our own.

The Christian is free of guilt from sin, because he or she has accepted the grace offered to them. As believers in an intimate relationship with the Lord, we are commanded to use this liberty in Jesus to love God and others, because we understand *we* are unconditionally loved.

Still, there is more to this. We cannot love others as they deserve to be loved in the eyes of God. We simply can't do it. I know...a little deflating. The Old Testament laws prove that no one can love God or their neighbor perfectly.

That's why we need to tap into the power of God's Spirit that indwells us! We can't even begin to love the unlovable without God enabling us to do so. Galatians 5:16-26, the passage immediately succeeding today's text, demonstrates our necessity for the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

I believe today is going to be a different day for you. We are so accustomed to feeling convicted during a sermon, realizing that change is needed in our lives, and then we walk through the sanctuary doors and leave it behind. I do it too. It is for *this* reason, I believe we can't hear the incredible message of God's limitless love and grace enough. You, in God's strength, have the power to make this day special.

I want to challenge you to repent – to turn from the path of selfishness and individualism today – even the "Christian" one. I want to challenge you to love the unlovable. We all know someone in our lives that we can't stand to be around. The person that you hide from and act busy around whenever they're within 20 feet of you.

Maybe you will even consider giving more than your weekly tithe to the church or someone in need. There are a *lot* of needs out their friends. You may owe someone an apology. Just last week I had to swallow my pride and give an apology that was a decade overdue. It wasn't easy, but it was so freeing!

I want you to have that! I believe *God*, wants you to have that.

I pray that God will convict you of something that you need to give up so that you can better focus on Him and those around you. *Some of you are really frustrated with me right now...*

In short, as your brother in Christ, I want you to pray that God will give you the grace and mercy to love others as He loves them – with a perfect love.

And finally, I want to challenge you to do something about it *today* – not tomorrow – but today. At least get the ball rolling. Head down to M St. and hand out \$5 gift cards to the homeless, take half a day off this week and come help out at VBS and meet and minister to your community, start a new ministry, *someone on the inside told me the youth ministry is in need of some administrative assistance during the week* – visit someone in need of love – maybe even someone you don't normally care to be around. Who knows? Let God be as original with you as He so desires. You have been freed, to love.

Before I go to prayer, I'm going to wind things down by reading Luke 6:32-36. May God allow its way into your hearts and minds:

32 If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

ⁱ Grudem, Wayne A.: *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich. : Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994, S. 1243