

# Freedom in Christ

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There is a story about two brothers who took over their father's store when he died. They enjoyed what they were doing, and they enjoyed each others company. After all - they were *brothers!*

But one day a man came in to make a small purchase. He paid for it with a dollar bill. The brother who made the sale placed the dollar on top of the cash register, and then walked with the customer to the door. When he returned, the dollar bill was gone. He said to his brother; "Did you take the dollar bill I left here?" His brother replied; "No, I didn't..." So he said; "Surely, you took it, there was nobody else in the store!" And his brother became angry, and said; "I'm telling you, I DID NOT take the dollar bill!"

From that point on, mistrust and suspicion grew between those two brothers. It reached a point where they could not even work together. So they built a partition right down the middle of the building, and made it into two stores. And in their anger, they refused to speak to each other for the next 20 years!

One day a stranger pulled up in his car, and entered one of the two stores. He asked; "Have you been in business very long here?" The store owner replied; "Yes, 30 or 40 years..." The stranger said; "Good, I need to tell you something. About 20 years ago, I passed through this town. I was out of work and homeless. I had no money and I had not eaten for days. I came down the alley outside, and when I looked into your store window, I saw a dollar bill on the cash register. I slipped in and took it. Just recently I became a Christian. And I know it was wrong of me to steal that dollar bill. So I have come to pay you back with interest, and to beg your forgiveness."

When the stranger finished his story, the old storekeeper began to weep. He said; "Would you do me a favor? Would you please go next door and tell that story to my brother?" And after the stranger told his story the second time the two brothers were reconciled, with hugs and apologies and tears. But what a tragedy for *brothers* - to have 20 years of hurt and a broken relationship that was based on nothing but mistrust and misunderstanding. And sometimes the exact same thing happens with our *spiritual* brothers and sisters. And the church is divided, and another nail is driven into the cross.

Our text comes from **Galatians 5:1-15**; *"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. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." 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. Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! 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. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."* (NIV)

In this text, the Apostle Paul is writing to Christians. And they are facing a problem that could cause much hurt and division in the body of Christ. Notice especially the first sentence in this text; *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."* There are a growing number of people in this country who do not appreciate freedom. They did not live in a time of war. They are not aware of the sacrifices that were made. They do not realize the great price that others have paid, so that *they* could enjoy the freedoms that they now have. They have had these freedoms for all their lives. And they have taken their freedom for granted, as they hit the streets to protest, and as they have directed profanity-laden hatred towards this great nation. And one day their freedom will be gone, because they did not appreciate it, nor did they recognize it.

But do we appreciate the freedom that we have - in Christ? In **John 8:32**, Jesus said; "*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*" In **John 8:36**, He said; "...*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*" And in **Rom 8:2**, the Apostle Paul said; "...*Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*"

The Christian is free! He is free from the guilt of sin - because he has experienced God's forgiveness. He is free from the penalty of sin - because Jesus died on the cross for him. And he is free from the old Law - which Paul referred to as the "yoke of slavery." **Heb 8:7** says; "*For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.*"

The problem was no one could keep the old law. And especially when you added in the rules and regulations that the Pharisees had added. It is said that by the time Jesus came into this world, the Pharisees had developed a system of 613 laws, composed of 365 negative commands and 248 positive ones. Add to that their countless traditions. It had indeed become a yoke of slavery.

For example, concerning the Sabbath; the Pharisees taught that you should not look in a mirror on the Sabbath, because you might be tempted to pluck out a gray hair, and that would be reaping! Many of us could do a lot of reaping! The Pharisees also taught that you *could* spit on a rock on the Sabbath, but you must not - under any circumstances spit on the ground. Because that would make mud, and mud was mortar, and that was work! Can you imagine trying to live under such a system?

But while we are talking about the Pharisees, we should keep in mind that the harshest words Jesus ever spoke - were not to Judas Iscariot who betrayed Him. They were not to Pilate, who sent Him to the cross. They were not to the woman at the well, who had had five husbands and was just living with number six. They were not even to the woman who was caught in the very act of adultery (which was part of an elaborate setup by the Pharisees in their attempt to trap Jesus). It was none of these things. The harshest words Jesus ever spoke in the New Testament - were to the religious leaders, and especially the Pharisees. They are described in **Luke 18:9** as; "*Some who were confident of their own righteousness, and looked down on everybody else...*"

But there is *freedom* in Christ! In the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul is dealing with a church at war: a war of *law vs grace*. There were people who were trying to force their views on other people, and they were trying to steal their freedom - by binding upon them at least *part* of the law of Moses. What a senseless effort!

Christianity is so much superior to the law of Moses - that's what the book of Hebrews is about! For one thing, the sacrifices made under the old law never really got rid of sin, they just put it off for another year. **Heb 10:34**; "*But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*" So Jesus became the *once for all* sacrifice for sin. **Heb 10:11-12** says; "*Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God.*"

The priests would stand every day, offering sacrifices for sin. It was an endless job. And yet, when they had offered hundreds, or even thousands of sacrifices – not one sin had been removed! But Jesus offered Himself – one sacrifice for sins for all time. And then He *sat down* at the right hand of God. Don't miss the significance of Jesus sitting down! The priests *stood* because their job was never finished. Jesus *sat down* - because His job was complete! **Gal 3:13** says; "*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 tree."*

**Col 2:14** says; "*Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross...*" The Hebrew writer said in **Heb 10:9**; "...*He sets aside the first to establish the second.*" And now we are free! The Apostle Paul said; "It is for freedom that CHRIST has set us free. Why would you *ever* want to go back to the yoke of slavery?"

*But there are two mistakes people often make concerning freedom. Two extremes if you will:*

**First, some would claim "freedom" as an excuse to ignore God's commands.** Their idea of freedom is: "I can do anything I want to do, I can live any way I want to live - it's all OK, it's my "*freedom*" in Christ! Paul already had this in mind, when he said in **Gal 5:13**; "*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not*

*use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature...*" In other words, it is freedom from the old law, and freedom from the rites and ceremonies and sacrifices and regulations that no one could keep. But it was not freedom to do as you please, and it was not freedom to *ignore* the word of God!

Other New Testament writers repeated the same theme; **1 Peter 2:16**; *"Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a coverup for evil; live as servants of God."* **Jude 4** speaks of; *"...godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality..."* Freedom is not a license to do whatever we please. Freedom does not mean the absence of laws. In Christ, we have freedom FROM sin, but we don't have freedom TO sin! So we must not make the mistake of using "*freedom*" to ignore God's commands. That is not the kind of freedom the Apostle Paul was talking about.

**The second mistake people sometimes make concerning freedom, is when they take away freedom by forcing their opinions on others.**

This is what Paul was dealing with in his letter to the churches of Galatia. There were some who were trying to enforce the *old law* on these new Christians. And Paul says to them; *"You were going great - who hindered you?" Stand firm! Do not let yourself be burdened again! You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ. You have fallen from grace."* Why would you let anyone take away your freedom?

In verse 14, Paul says; *"the entire law is summed up in a single command."* The command he cites is to *"love your neighbor as yourself."* In verse 6, he says; "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value..." And then he said; *"The only thing that counts - is faith expressing itself through love."*

Notice especially Paul's warning in verse 15; "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other..."

Sadly, in the church today, there has been too little love, and too much biting and devouring. I'm talking about our history now. A while back, I read about some men who were once considered to be faithful gospel preachers. They were well respected, and often quoted by others. These same men are now viewed by many as *apostates* and *heretics*. The reason? In their study, they came to the conclusion that the *Holy Spirit* literally dwells in a Christian, and in some way *helps* that Christian grow spiritually. Those who believed this were written up in church papers, and it became a great source of controversy among churches of Christ! Some would go so far as to say that if you believe the *only* way the Holy Spirit acts in you is through the written word of God, then we can have fellowship with you. Otherwise, there are some serious questions about our fellowship!

This is just one example, and it has been published all over the internet. Today men write papers and blogs, attacking their fellow Christians about these and other issues. Some of those writings are filled with sarcasm. Some of them are filled with misrepresentation. Some have become nothing but personal attacks. And some are just seething with hate. And we wonder why churches are dying.

There's an old story I saw years ago, here is one version of it; *A man was walking along and he saw a man on a bridge who was about to jump. So he yelled; "Don't do it!" And the man said; "Nobody loves me..." The first man said; "GOD loves you! Do you believe in God?" The guy on the bridge said; "Yes..." And the man said; "Me too!" And then he asked; "Are you a Christian?" And the guy on the bridge said; "Yes..." And he said; "Me too!"*

*He asked; "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" The guy said; "Protestant..." And the man said; "Me too!" And then he asked; "What church?" The guy on the bridge said; "Baptist..." And the man said; "Me too!" And then he asked; "Are you Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" And the guy replied; "Northern Baptist." And the man said; "Me too!" And then he asked; "Are you Northern conservative Baptist or Northern liberal Baptist?" And the guy on the bridge said; "Northern Conservative Baptist..." And the man said; "Me too!"*

*And then he asked; "Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" And the guy on the bridge said; "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." And the man shouted; "ME too!!"*

*And then he asked; "Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879...Or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?" And the guy on the bridge said; "I'm Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912." And the first man said; "Die heretic!" - and he pushed him off the bridge!*

Now that story is funny - but it's also sad, because it gets pretty close to the truth. The Apostle Paul said; "It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us free!" But man has come along and said; "*As long as you can agree with me on every single thing there is, I'll have fellowship with you. But if not - I'll write you off and I'll write you up!*" And while there are many who have chosen to *ignore* God's word and live as they please, there also many others who have determined to speak where God has not spoken, and to bind what God has not bound. And then attack those who may differ with them. Sadly, some even seem to *enjoy* the attack. The Apostle Paul was talking to the church, when he said in **Gal 5:15**; "*If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*"

A while back, we were out cleaning the fence-line in the backyard. The neighbor has a dog that is not at all friendly. I'm not sure what it is, but I think it is at least part Pit Bull. And while we were working on the fence, the dog came out. It stood there and barked at us the whole time. It looked like it was trying to come through the fence. In fact, after a while it had blood on its jaw and lip, which I think it may have done on the fence, as it tried to come *through* it! That dog kept on barking, while we just kept on working, and ignored it. After a while the dog finally got tired and sat down - *for a minute*. And then it stood up and started barking all over again. I got the distinct feeling that dog didn't *like* us. And I'm real sure it didn't *love* us! All it wanted to do - was bite and devour...

Over the years some well-meaning Christians have developed a sort of "Pit Bull mentality." You are their friend - if you can agree with them on 100% of everything. But if you *disagree* - they will turn on you in a heartbeat! They will call you a *heretic*, an *apostate*, a *false teacher* and a *liar*! And they will think that they are doing God a favor!

Jesus came to "*seek and save the lost*" (**Luke 19:10**). But the lost are going to hell - while churches fuss and fight, attack each other, and draw their lines in the sand. Is it because we have become so ineffective at reaching the lost that we have turned on each other? Has the mission of "*going into all the world and preaching the gospel to every creature*" been replaced with some other mission?

In John 17, Jesus prayed that His followers might ALL be one: **John 17:20-21**; "*Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me.*"

Is that the case today? Not by a long shot! Out of the "Restoration Movement" - a movement that was designed to bring about the *unity* of believers, we now have: The Disciples of Christ, The Christian Church, The Independent Christian Church, The Churches of Christ, The non-institutional Churches of Christ, The Premillennial Churches of Christ, The One Cup Churches of Christ, The No Bible Class Churches of Christ, The Max King Churches of Christ, The Boston and Crossroads Churches of Christ. You name it - we've got it! And while there is a spirit of "kinship" in *some* of these churches, there are some who will not have anything to do with *any* of the others.

Just for the sake of illustration, there never should have been a division between the amillennial and premillennial brethren. There *never* should have been a division over one's view of the end times. Here are two Christian men: Both of them are godly men, both of them Bible students, and both of them love the Lord. And as they study the Bible, one of them comes to the conclusion that Jesus is coming back, and He's going to reign on this earth for 1000 years. The other man studies his Bible, and he comes to the conclusion that everything is going to take place in one single event at the end of time, and Jesus will never set foot on this earth again. Two Christian men, two godly men, two Bible students - who just happen to come to different conclusions about what the Bible teaches about the end times. Is this really something to divide over? Doesn't this sound a lot like those two brothers who built the wall down the middle of their store? Where is the *freedom* in this?

I know for those who were around back then - you did not *ask* for it to happen. You never sought to make these beliefs a test of fellowship or a source of division. But there were some who *made* it a source of division, and withdrew their fellowship. And it makes no sense. Do you know what the message is for amillennial churches of Christ? "*Jesus is coming back, we don't know WHEN, so get READY!*" Do you know what the message is for premillennial churches of Christ? "*Jesus is coming back, we don't know*

*WHEN, so get READY!"*

This is just one of the *many* examples of division in the Lord's church today.

How Jesus must weep, when He sees what men have done to His body, the church! There is *FREEDOM* in Christ. But some have used it as a license to sin, while others have sought to restrict the freedom of their fellow Christians.

I read that near the end of the Second World War, the guards of a Japanese concentration camp heard that the Americans were approaching. So they unlocked the gates of the prison, and ran into the woods. But the prisoners didn't know it. They remained in their cells! And when the soldiers came, they had only to announce to the prisoners: "You're free!"

The Apostle Paul says; "You have been called to liberty - you're free!" Don't go back into bondage! Don't allow anyone to hinder you! "It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us free!"

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