

SERIES: Free At Last!

SERMON: **The Charter of Christian Liberty**

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 1:1-5

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

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There are three Bible books that are preeminently “Gospel” books, i.e. they emphasize above all else the good news that Jesus Christ came to save sinners through His death on the Cross. Those books are John, Romans, and Galatians. Today we are going to begin a four-month study of the Book of Galatians.

Without doubt one of the most eloquent speeches of the twentieth century was Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech on the Mall in Washington, D.C. in 1963. His final words are lodged indelibly in our memories, even for those too young to have witnessed it. The same words are etched on his gravestone: “Free at last, free at last! Thank God almighty, I am free at last.” I have chosen that phrase, “Free at Last,” as the title for this series, for the book of Galatians is ultimately a book about freedom—not political freedom, not social freedom, not economic freedom, but spiritual freedom, freedom in Christ.

We know, of course, that no one is spiritually free unless and until he or she has been born again by faith in Christ, but Galatians goes further. It recognizes that there are many who have professed faith in Christ but are not enjoying fully the freedom He won for them.

They are stuck in the performance trap—trying to meet the expectations of others, or even what they perceive as the expectations of God. When they fail to meet those expectations, they often suffer a sense of guilt and failure, and real victory in the Christian life is impossible.

The goal of Galatians is to help us find true freedom in Christ—not just freedom from the penalty of sin but freedom also from the performance trap. No wonder it has been called “the Magna Carta of Christian Emancipation” or the Charter of Christian Liberty. Its goal is to convince us that we are saved by grace and sanctified by grace. It’s all of grace.

Friends, the Book of Galatians is unadulterated spiritual dynamite. However, just as dynamite is very useful and very dangerous at the same time, I must warn you that a proper understanding of Galatians may result in some serious demolition in your life before the landscape can be cleared for rebuilding. Those who have come out of rigid, legalistic backgrounds in which they were taught that in order to be acceptable to God, they had to perform certain rites and rituals or keep a list of rules and regulations, are liable to be blown out of the saddle by the early chapters of Galatians. On the other hand, anyone who thinks Christian freedom gives him *carte blanche* to do whatever he wants will have a rude awakening in the latter chapters.

I got an email from one of our Elders this week after I announced we were going to be studying Galatians. He wrote,

I remember when you taught through Galatians in the early in 1980's, and what a watershed experience it was for me. As you clearly laid out in the doctrine of Grace I was energized in a new way. How could I have grown up in church, even on the mission field, all my life and not have an understanding of Grace? I'm looking forward to going through it again. It's one of many great memories of what God has done in my life at

First Free over the years. Thank you, Nathan Kanagy.

It is my prayer that this will be the experience and testimony of many more of us as we tackle this book once more.

I want to begin with an overview of Galatians. Let's read Galatians 1:1-5:

Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Overview of Galatians

The author. Whenever a letter arrives in the mail there are certain things we look for immediately: Who's it from? Who's it to? What's the point? When I glance through the mail, the very first thing I look at is the return address on the envelope. Sometimes there is no return address, so I have to open the letter to find out who sent it. In that case I always go immediately to the end, because whether I read the letter or not depends upon who sent it.

Ancient Greeks were smarter. They always put the author's name first so one didn't have to unroll a scroll to the end to find out who wrote it. The very first word in the book of Galatians is “Paul,” so immediately we know that the one writing is the Apostle to the Gentiles. There is virtually no serious scholar who questions Paul's authorship of this book. His fingerprints are everywhere, in vocabulary, writing style, theology, and viewpoint.

The second thing I look for when going through a stack of letters is the addressee. Who is the intended recipient?

The recipients. The mail that is of the most interest to me is that which is personal and is addressed just to me. Letters to “Mr. & Mrs.” are usually opened by Jan, while letters addressed to “Occupant” go directly in the round file. The letter called Galatians is sent to a specific audience—the churches of Galatia. While that isn't quite as personal as, say the letters addressed to Philemon or Timothy, it's certainly better than “occupant.” It is as personal as Paul could get with a letter intended as a circular letter to a number of churches Paul had established on his first missionary journey to what is now the central part of Turkey.

The date. It was written, then, probably during or just before his second missionary journey, sometime between A.D. 48-50 and about 15 years after the death of Christ. It was probably Paul's first epistle of the dozen preserved for us in the NT.

The point. Most letters have a point. Very few of us take the time and trouble to write when we have nothing particular to say—though I must say the proliferation of email and texting is causing me to rethink that observation. When I open a personal letter I almost always scan it first to pick up the reason for which it was written.

Is it a form letter?
 Is the writer mad about something?
 Is it a letter of gratitude?
 Am I being asked to give something or do something?

Paul also writes for a reason—something has happened that desperately needs attention from the churches. What is it? The answer is that false teachers have begun to infiltrate the churches he had planted in Galatia. Let me read a few verses from Josh's text for next week, 1:6-7:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

How did this happen so quickly? Well, Paul was a traveling missionary, so after he had established these churches during his first missionary journey, he appointed elders to oversee them, and then continued on to plant churches elsewhere.

Occasionally certain influential leaders would get a foothold in these churches and, in the absence of Paul, begin to twist the Gospel message. One of the things I have noticed over the years, having participated in the planting of more than 25 churches, is that new churches tend to attract people with agendas, people with theological hobbyhorses. Such people know they would have a hard time influencing a large, established church, because there are mature leaders, strong traditions, and many checks and balances. But a new church, especially one filled with new converts, is a different story. Such a church can sometimes be moved in a new direction relatively quickly by just one strong, charismatic leader.

When I went to St. Louis in 1984, I went to a brand new church with about 55 people. The church was a year old and hadn't had a pastor, but four or five elders had been chosen. Two of them had strong personal agendas. Fortunately for me, and for the rest of the church, they were on opposite ends of the spectrum. One was from a Quaker background and was extremely suspicious of pastoral leadership and an advocate of what I would call radical congregationalism. The other was a disciple of Ray Stedman and believed strongly in elder rule. Thankfully within a few years both were out of leadership and the church was able to find a balance between their viewpoints.

A similar threat hung over the Galatian churches. During Paul's absence, certain men succeeded in getting into positions of power and began to remake the church according to their own personal views. They accused Paul of "easy believism," i.e. the view that a person simply had to give mental assent to the facts of Christianity and, *abra cadabra*, he was saved. "On the contrary," these teachers argued vigorously, "a person needs to believe *plus* perform certain rituals *plus* keep certain laws *before* he can be sure of a right standing with God." We call this position legalism.

Now the fact of the matter is that in this debate the false teachers in Galatia were distorting Paul's

true position. It is true that he *had* rejected the view that *any* ritual or *any* kind of law-keeping had *anything* to do with a person's salvation. His teaching on the Gospel was that salvation is by the free grace of God, by the finished work of Christ on the cross, plus nothing! Human works do not save, nor do they even *contribute* to salvation. We are saved by believing, not by achieving. We are saved by grace. That was Paul's theology.

But the Apostle was never guilty of "easy believism." He had never taught that mere mental assent to a set of facts can save anyone. Faith can never be viewed as mere mental assent but rather a deep and abiding trust in the character and promises of God, a trust that inevitably results in a changed life.

Now when Paul heard that these false teachers were subverting the Gospel in the churches he had planted in Galatia, and when he learned that some of his dear converts were confused and wavering, he fired off this letter. From start to finish it is a vigorous defense of the Gospel of grace against all who would dilute it by requiring some kind of human performance in order to experience salvation or maintain salvation.

This theme is most clearly stated in 5:1: "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." The fact that Christ set us free is not disputed by anyone who calls himself a Christian. But sadly, many religious teachers simply offer another form of slavery. And to Paul, liberation is worthless if it simply substitutes one form of slavery for another.

Let me use some analogies, first in the political arena. For 70 years Marxism preached liberation from the oppression that capitalism and other political systems brought upon the lower classes. That's a noble cause, for there is no question that large masses of common people have been exploited by these economic systems. But the liberation communism offered was the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was far worse than the economic slavery they had experienced previously.

How about an analogy in the social realm? A teenager or a housewife or a business man begins to experience boredom. So they begin to look for liberation in partying or drugs or promiscuity. And they often find freedom from their depressed feelings. But very soon they discover that what they have really done is to exchange one form of slavery for a much more severe form.

Or we can look at the religious realm. There are a great many people whose church experience is essentially a slavery to dead ritualism. Their spiritual life offers them nothing as they go through the motions week after week. They experience what called by Paul "a form of godliness without the power." Then they meet some exciting guru, or some cult promises them a sense of belonging, or some TV evangelist promises them health and wealth. And for a while they experience freedom by exchanging ritual and liturgy and traditionalism for new, freer forms of worship. But it isn't long before the brainwashing begins to enslave the new convert and he can no longer think for himself—he has to seek the advice of his guru for everything.

My point is that one can be set free from one slavery to a worse one. But Paul says, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” And Jesus said, “If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.” So Paul's theme is that believers should recognize their freedom in Christ, should use and enjoy that freedom, and should not allow anyone to enslave them again by means of a religion of ritual, works, law, or performance of any kind.

Now this theme is developed by means of three key supporting ideas, represented by three key words: legalism, liberty, and lawlessness.

The key concepts supporting salvation by grace:

1. Legalism is an attack on the very heart of the Gospel. Clark Pinnock, who sadly has himself wavered on some key doctrinal issues in recent years, nevertheless wrote a great book on Galatians over 35 years ago. In it he very astutely observed that “in the last analysis there are only two religions. One calls on men to impress God with their own deeds (that’s legalism, performance-based faith), and one demands that they renounce all such pretensions and cast themselves on God's unmerited favor in Christ (that’s the Gospel).”¹ The parentheses in that quote were added. Another way of stating the same issue is the bridge illustration many of you have learned. All human religions are the story of man's efforts to bridge the immense gulf separating sinful man from a holy God, while biblical Christianity is the story of God finding man by bridging that great gulf with the cross of Christ.

Legalism, then, by its very nature is incompatible with Christian faith. Yet that is exactly what has begun to infiltrate the Galatian churches. Listen again as Paul addresses them in 1:6: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.” And in 2:4 he speaks of “some false brothers who infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.” And in 3:1-2: “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?”

We need to give careful attention to this issue of legalism, for it is still alive and well in the Church. Oh, I don't know anyone who is advocating circumcision as necessary for salvation, as the Galatian heretics were, but there are many who demand baptism as essential; others put restrictions on the believer's diet; and still others have a long list of do's and don'ts not found in the Bible, but a list, nevertheless, to which they expect all other believers to conform. Legalism is an attack on the very heart of the Gospel.

The second key word is liberty or freedom.

2. Liberty is to be enjoyed and defended by God's people. In 4:7 Paul tells the Galatian believers, “So you are no longer a slave, but a son.” And in 5:13 he adds, “You, my brothers,

were called to be free.” Again and again, the theme is reiterated that Christ has set us free. Our days of slavery are over. Freedom, based solely upon Christ's finished work on the cross, is ours to enjoy and it should be enjoyed. Not only is it to be enjoyed but it is also to be defended.

I think sometimes believers who know about and enjoy the freedom that they have in Christ find themselves intimidated by legalists in the Church. After all, the legalists can sound so spiritual; and they profess to be so concerned about holy living; and they are so quick to judge those that don't conform to their standards.

But Paul wasn't intimidated at all, and we shouldn't be either. He defended his freedom and he expects us to defend ours. In a parallel passage in his epistle to the Colossians he not only denounced the legalists but then added this command: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are but a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Col. 2:16-17). Enjoy and defend your freedom, Paul urges.

But there is a third very important idea which the Apostle espouses in this epistle, which is absolutely essential to the full understanding of his theme. And it is this:

3. Lawlessness is just as incompatible with liberty as is legalism. So often in the history of the Church, where there has been a revival of Christian liberty, there has unfortunately been an accompanying decline in godly living. I have known some self-appointed “grace” teachers who have preached grace without preaching godly living. As I have watched the lives of individuals exposed to their ministries over a period of time, I have consistently noticed a deterioration in moral behavior, in evangelistic fervor, in prayer, and in virtually every area of human responsibility. Some entire denominations have become so focused on grace doctrines that godliness disappears from the radar screen.

The Apostle knew this was a potential danger, so in 5:13 he states in no uncertain terms, “You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” A few verses later he adds, “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” As a matter of fact, most of the last two chapters are devoted to helping believers see that while they are saved only by grace and while they are kept saved only by grace, there are nevertheless moral obligations upon the believer which he cannot ignore with impunity.

One way to express Paul's point is to observe that Christ has granted us freedom *from* the power of sin, but not freedom *to* sin. If we can maintain the distinction between liberty and legalism on the one hand, and between liberty and lawlessness on the other, we will have a balanced grasp on the message of Galatians.

Now I want to share with you a simple outline of the book of Galatians. It is adapted from Clark Pinnock's little book, *Truth on Fire*:

A simple outline of Galatians

It divides the book of Galatians into three parts of two chapters each. The first portion is dealing with TRUTH, the second with SALVATION, and the third with LIFESTYLE.

The first question, concerning TRUTH, asks, “Where do we find authority in religious faith?” And the answer is that we find authority in the revelation God gave to the apostles and prophets. Chapters 1 & 2.

The second question is, concerning SALVATION, asks, “How do we become members of God’s family?” And the answer is, “by grace through faith, plus nothing.” Chapters 3 & 4.

And the final question, concerning LIFESTYLE, asks, “How should we then live?” Having been saved by grace and having been liberated by Christ, are we now free to do whatever we please? The answer is that our liberation is a liberation from sin to godly living. Chapters 5 & 6.

Let’s at least get our feet wet in the text today by giving brief attention to the salutation.

The salutation of Galatians (1:1-5)

Salutations are sometimes overlooked because they sound so much alike, but I would like to point out what is different about the salutation of Galatians from other letters of that day and even different from Paul's other letters.

Paul's credibility. He identifies himself as an apostle and then he goes to unusual lengths to discuss the source of his apostleship. In fact, most of the first two chapters are concerned with a defense of his apostleship. Why is this an immediate concern to Paul in this particular letter? Simply because if the false teachers can successfully challenge his claim to be an apostle, they can more easily discredit the Gospel of grace which he taught.

By the way, the term “Apostle” means “one who is commissioned to speak and act for another.” An apostle is an official ambassador. Paul makes it clear that his apostleship had no human source—he got it directly from Jesus Christ and from God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, He was commissioned to speak and write with authority and accuracy about the Gospel.

Someone has said that there are four kinds of ministers:

- (1) those sent from God, not from man, like Paul.
- (2) those sent from God through man, like Timothy, who was ordained by Paul.
- (3) those sent from man, not from God, which would include every ordained clergyman who does not know Jesus Christ as personal Savior, of which there are, sadly, many.
- (4) and those sent neither from God nor from man. These are the charlatans and shysters who employ religion for their personal profit.

Paul had credibility because he was God's ambassador.

Paul's greeting. He says, "Grace and peace to you." This was a typical greeting in an ancient letter and is found in nearly every one of Paul's epistles. Grace or *charis* was the normal Greek way of saying "hello," while peace or *shalom* was the Hebrew term for the same thing. But for Paul these terms had far more significance than a mere "hello and hello." Grace, which is God's unmerited favor, always precedes peace, because were it not for God's unmerited favor there could be no peace with God. The Christian's peace is threatened when God's grace is undermined. If we have to keep performing for God, how can we have peace? But when we rest in God's grace, true peace is ours in abundance.

In the second part of the greeting he informs us of the price paid for the grace and peace God offers us. They are free for us but very costly to God and to His Son, for Jesus "gave Himself for our sins." The cross is *the saving event* in which grace was exhibited and peace made available.

And then he tells us that the purpose of Christ's death was to conduct a rescue operation: "to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father." The Scriptures are very clear on the fact that there is both a "present age" and "an age to come." Since the Fall, the present age has been under the influence of the Evil One, Satan. What Christ has done is to transfer the believer from the sphere of Satan's power into a new order in which the life of the age to come can be enjoyed already. But because our roots go down deep into the soil of this present age, a powerful liberation is required to uproot us and transplant us to fresh ground. Yet this is the very thing which Christ by His death has made possible.

The point of all this is that God has provided completely for man's salvation, based upon the finished work of Christ on the cross. No human requirements or accomplishments are mentioned.

Certainly the most unusual thing about the salutation to the Galatian churches is . . .

Paul's doxology. A doxology is an ascription of glory to God, and it is almost always used as a benediction at the conclusion of a letter. But here Paul uses a doxology in his salutation. I believe his purpose is this: right from the beginning of this letter he wants us to focus our hearts and minds upon the glory of God. He's going to be attacking heresy; he's going to be arguing fine points of doctrine; he's going to be rebuking his friends and converts for wavering. In such a context it would be easy for us to get our minds off of God and onto emotional issues. Doctrinal disputation, as important as it is, should never be allowed to interfere with our worship of God.

There's another reason for this doxology, however. In the last analysis the real issue at stake here is the glory of God. By their insistence on human achievement, the false teachers of Galatia were downgrading and minimizing what God has done. To add to God's work is to glorify man and dishonor God. But by pointing to the all-sufficiency of Christ and His finished work, Paul was magnifying God's grace and ascribing glory to Him.

Conclusion

You know, the Gospel, the Good News, has been given concisely but very clearly in these few verses this morning. It is that Jesus Christ launched a rescue effort when He died on the cross. He paid the penalty for our sin, He provided deliverance from the power of sin, and He will eventually provide deliverance even from the presence of sin.

All that can be your own personal possession if you are willing to receive the grace of God by faith. There is nothing you can contribute to your salvation other than to trust Him with your whole heart.

i. Clark Pinnock, *Truth on Fire*, Baker, 1972, Preface.