

June 8, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Stand Firm in Freedom*

Galatians 5:1-6

Perhaps you've heard someone say 'There are so many religions in the world – how can you know for sure which one is true?' That is basically a statement from ignorance from people who have not taken the time to check their opinions with the facts. There are only two religions in the world: ***the religion that says we must work our way to heaven or nirvana or oblivion or whatever; and the religion that says salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.*** The one is based on human sweat – the other is based on divine intervention. The names and the rituals and the particulars may change – but every religious system other than Christianity comes down to human achievement or self-righteousness.

*At a comparative religions conference, the wise and the scholarly were in a spirited debate about what is unique about Christianity. Someone suggested what set Christianity apart from other religions was the concept of incarnation, the idea that God took human form in Jesus. But someone quickly said, "Well, actually, other faiths believe that God appears in human form." Another suggestion was offered: what about resurrection? The belief that death is not the final word. That the tomb was found empty. Someone slowly shook his head. Other religions have accounts of people returning from the dead. Then C.S. Lewis walked into the room, tweed jacket, pipe, arm full of papers, a little early for his presentation. He sat down and took in the conversation, which had by now evolved into a fierce debate. Finally during a lull, he spoke saying, "what's all this rumpus about?" Everyone turned in his direction. Trying to explain themselves they said, "We're debating what's unique about Christianity." "Oh, that's easy," answered Lewis. "It's grace." The room fell silent.*

Christianity uniquely claims God's grace comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim. Buddhists, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It's not a free ride. Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions. The Jewish interpretation of the law implies God has requirements for people to be acceptable to Him and in Islam Allah is a God of Judgment not a God of grace. You live to appease him. ***Only Christianity dares to proclaim God's grace is unconditional.*** Christians boldly proclaim that grace really has precious little to do with us, our ability, or our lack of ability, or any inherent deserving qualities. Rather, grace is all about God and God freely giving to us the gifts of forgiveness, mercy, and love.

From the beginning of time, one of Satan's most effective tactics has been to pit human achievement against divine grace; and incite men to try and work their way to God. Galatians sets the record straight – it is the gospel of grace that saves men and women and sets them free from the bondage of sin and death and condemnation and trying to earn their salvation – and sets them free to be fully satisfied in God. From chapter five on, Paul begins to give us some of the practical implications of the gospel of grace. And he starts here in verse 1 with freedom: ***It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*** Galatians 5:1

The word order in the Greek is interesting because it lends itself to two equally true propositions. Literally, it says ***'In the freedom therefore which Christ us made free, stand fast.'*** And here we understand that what transpires when we believe on Christ for salvation is that we are brought into a realm of freedom that we had not known before. I would venture to say that most people do not know that they are slaves of sin until Christ comes into their lives – but once He does, there is this tremendous sense of liberation that fills our souls and we realize that we are free. For some it is freedom from guilt – for some a freedom from bad habits – for some a freedom from a sense of impending doom, or freedom from hopelessness. In any case it is a sense of liberation from something that has held them captive till now.

And the exhortation from Paul is to stand in that freedom. Not try to get back to it – not work hard to feel free – just stand fast. The word Paul uses means ***a current condition resulting from a past action. Christ has made us free – therefore stay free.*** Don't let something rob you of that freedom – especially things like circumcision, rituals, and days and months and seasons and years, or all the ways we have tried to be deserving of the grace of God.

The other way to understand this is just as true: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free.* That is, ***the will of Christ for your life is freedom.*** God wants us to walk in uncompromising, unrelenting, unconquerable freedom. Freedom from the sinful passions of the flesh – freedom from guilt and worry and depression and fear – freedom to love God supremely and love our neighbor as ourself – freedom to live on this earth as aliens and strangers and not be seduced away from freedom back to slavery again.

Paul says, '*keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*' I like how the Tyndale Bible puts it: '*wrappe not youre selves agayne in the yoke*'. That is, don't get caught with your neck in the yoke. The yoke is referring to a common farm implement that was fastened on the necks of the oxen or horses to enable them to pull the plow or harrow or wagon or whatever the farmer wanted. The point was that it was a work tool and Paul uses it here to invoke the image of working for your salvation. When you set aside grace – all you have left is the yoke, and you are working hard trying to raise a crop of goodness. But *It was for freedom that Christ set us free*, and it is in this freedom we need to stay. So it might be helpful to understand what kind of freedom the Bible is talking about – and I think we can see it explained in at least five areas – Release, Reconciliation, Restoration, Relationship and Rapture. Actually the last one is joy, but I needed an 'R' and not a 'J' to keep it going – and in any case, rapture means ecstatic joy – so it works.

### **Release**

***The nature of this freedom is firstly release.*** Galatians 4:3-6 '*So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son...so that He might redeem those who were under the Law...*' To be redeemed is to be released from some kind of bondage. This is what Jesus proclaimed at the very start of His earthly ministry: *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to prisoners;* Isaiah 61:1 Everyone of us is in bondage to sin until by faith we receive the gift of God's grace to release us. Is there something that you need to be released from this morning? Is there a besetting sin that dogs your steps? Do you have the sense this morning that you are somehow wrapped in the yoke of sin? Good News this morning! Christ is here specifically to release you and set you free.

### **Reconciliation**

***The second thing about the nature of this freedom is reconciliation.*** We are estranged, alienated from God because of sin. In the beginning, Adam walked with God in the garden – there was no separation – no alienation – man had fellowship with God. And at some level, there is this desire in all of us to get back to that place of communion with God – to bridge the gulf of sin and be reconciled to Him. There's a story of a Spanish father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: ***Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.*** On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and reconciliation. Through the sacrifice of Jesus the lost relationship between man and God is restored – we are reconciled. *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.* Romans 5:10

Do you have the sense this morning that you are estranged from God? That He is far from you – that your sins have separated you from His presence? Don't labor under that anymore – the offer of grace is reconciliation with the Father. In Luke 15 there is the familiar story of the prodigal son, who, after a season of living like he wanted, and squandering his inheritance, comes to his senses in the pig sty where he was living and returns home. And the Bible records that '*...while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*' Luke 15:21 Evidently his father had been anticipating this moment and kept a long lookout for his son – and when he returned with tears and repentance, was waiting to receive him and be reconciled. And he waits this morning for some of you.

### **Restoration**

***The third thing about this freedom is that our vision is restored.*** When Jesus opened His earthly ministry at that synagogue in Nazareth – we already noted that He quoted Isaiah 61, but He also inserted a line from the passage in Isaiah 42:7 to this proclamation: part of why He came was *to open the eyes that are blind.* ***The liberty Christ proclaims is not only release and reconciliation – but restoration of sight.*** After He had healed the blind man in John 9, Jesus told him - *For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.* Before we come to Christ we are blind to the reality of things.

We think we know truth – but it is not until our sight is restored that we begin to understand that we were blind people living in the kingdom of the blind. When Jesus touches our eyes, suddenly everything becomes clear – we begin to understand who it is who has made us and why we are here and life suddenly has eternal meaning and purpose.

## Relationship

***The fourth thing about this freedom in which we stand is that our relationship with God is as sons of righteousness – not slaves of sin. Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.*** Galatians 4:7 There is incredible freedom in relating as sons, rather than slaves. Sons have a position that slaves can never have – and they have the inheritance that only come with sonship.

## Rapture

***Lastly, this freedom is the freedom of joy, real joy, lasting and eternal joy.*** Full freedom is full of joy because there is nothing you need to fear, nothing you need to worry about, nothing that nags at your conscience, nothing that separates you from God – and everything works to increase your joy in Christ – not to take away from it. You know that you are standing in freedom when circumstances are unfavorable – the situation is grim – when you have to look up to see the bottom – and you have an unshakeable sense of joy in the middle of it all. It was Richard Wormbrand, imprisoned for his faith under communism for 14 years, suffered severe torture, separation from his wife and family and church, went hungry nearly all the time and lacked adequate clothing to withstand the brutal winters there, who testified that alone, cold, hungry, and hurting that ***'...every night I danced for joy.'***

Billy Sunday, a turn-of-the-century evangelist said, ***The trouble with many men is that they have got just enough religion to make them miserable.*** In other words – they are not standing firm in this freedom. In many respects these people are like the Galatians who have traded grace for works and it makes them miserable – not joyful. As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: ***"It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians—and I am one of them."***

The freedom of joy is not just a sense of personal rapture – ***but it also exhibits itself in overflow of the gospel.*** That is, when we are standing in the freedom of real and lasting joy – that joy cannot help but overflow in the transmission of the gospel to others.

On July 18, 1738, two months after his conversion, Charles Wesley did an amazing thing. He had spent the week witnessing to inmates at the Newgate prison with a friend named "Bray," who he described as "a poor ignorant mechanic." One of the men they spoke to was "a black slave that had robbed his master." He was sick with a fever and was condemned to die. Wesley and Bray asked if they could be locked in overnight with the prisoners who were to be executed the next day. That night they spoke the gospel. They told the men that "one came down from heaven to save lost sinners." They described the sufferings of the Son of God, his sorrows, agony, and death. The next day, the men were loaded onto a cart and taken to Tyburn. Charles went with them. Ropes were fastened around their necks so that the cart could be driven off and leave them swinging in the air to choke to death. The fruit of Wesley's and Bray's night-long labor was astonishing. Here's what Wesley wrote:

***They were all cheerful; full of comfort, peace, and triumph; assuredly persuaded Christ had died for them, and waited to receive them into paradise. . . . The black . . . saluted me with his looks. As often as his eyes met mine, he smiled with the most composed, delightful countenance I ever saw. We left them going to meet their Lord, ready for the bridegroom. When the cart drove off, not one stirred, or struggled for life, but meekly gave up their spirits. Exactly at twelve they were turned off. I spoke a few suitable words to the crowd; and returned, full of peace and confidence in our friends' happiness. That hour under the gallows was the most blessed hour of my life.*** (*Journal*, vol 1, [120-123](#)) From *Charles Wesley's Radical and Fruitful Risk* August 11, 1991 by John Piper

One of the things that stand out about this to me is the fact that these condemned criminals were so thoroughly converted by the testimony of a two-month old Christian and a poor, ignorant mechanic that the prospect of a cruel death not only did not hold for them any fear, but that they were fully convinced that their sins were washed away and God would welcome them into heaven by grace through faith – not on the basis of anything good that they had done – but by the precious blood of Jesus and His death on the cross.

Too often I have heard the excuse from Christians that they don't know enough to be able to present the gospel to others. How much do you suppose a two-month-old Christian and a poor, ignorant mechanic knew? Evidently enough to give a clear presentation of the gospel that impacted these condemned men for eternity. And besides that, **WHY**, after all these years in church and small group bible studies, and personal devotions – **Why don't you know enough?** More often than not it is the new convert, whose heart is lit on fire from God, who is out there winning the lost – and it is the long-in-the-tooth Christian that says, 'Well, I just don't have the gift of evangelism.'

Don't be misled – that is just a euphemism for 'I'm afraid to share the gospel' or 'I just do friendship evangelism' – which means that you invite your neighbor over for a barbeque and talk about everything but the gospel and the fact that they are on their way to hell without Christ – and then perhaps you give them a weak invitation to 'come to church with us sometime'.

*It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. We need to stand firm in this freedom – released from the bondage of sin, reconciled to God, with vision restored, relationship with Christ renewed and filled with unrelenting, unconquerable joy* – so that we who have been made glad in God will live to make others glad in Him too. And we can only do that if we stand firm in the freedom with which Christ has set us free.

*Our gracious and compassionate heavenly Father,*

*You have freely given Your Son to pay our debt that we would no longer be slaves to sin and death but free sons of righteousness. All our prayers, all our vows, all our work, all our tears, could not pardon our sins – nothing less than the precious blood of Jesus could wash away our stains and bring us to You. We thank You for the grace that came to free us and fill us with all the joy our hearts could hold. To enjoy You is to know the uncompromising, unrelenting, unconquerable, freedom of eternal life. O precious Savior, grant that we would stand firm in this freedom and not wrap ourselves again in the yoke of slavery. Keep us in the freedom of experiencing Your salvation continually so that we who have been made glad in God will live to make the nations glad in You we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus our Savior, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto You.  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.***