GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

GALATIANS: FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE

Session Four: FREE FOR THE NEIGHBOR

Texts: Galatians 5:1–6:18

CENTRAL THEME

Christ frees us from the work of establishing our righteousness before God. That freedom opens our life toward the neighbor.

Paul does not end his letter by making love the condition that finally validates grace. He speaks of life in the Spirit, in which people still needing forgiveness are turned toward one another in service.

The question changes:

What does my neighbor need?

Our work can attend to that need because it no longer has to carry the weight of our salvation.

1. THE FREEDOM WE ARE TEMPTED TO SURRENDER

Paul's warning about circumcision in 5:2–4 concerns accepting it as necessary for justification. That course commits the person to the whole law and abandons reliance upon grace.

He does not make the absence of circumcision a new badge of superiority. At 5:6, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision establishes standing in Christ.

We are capable of boasting even in our freedom from religious boasting. We can look down on those who have not understood grace as clearly as we have.

Paul takes both badges away. Christ remains the ground of our life. Our understanding of freedom cannot replace the Savior who gives it.

2. FAITH ACTIVE IN LOVE

Faith has its life in Christ and becomes active in love. The movement toward the neighbor belongs to the life received through the promise.

We should not turn that statement into an examination intended to determine whether Christ's gift was valid after all. The anxious self can make even love into a mirror in which it searches for evidence of its own worth.

The neighbor then disappears behind our concern with ourselves.

Paul turns us outward. Is there someone to feed, someone to listen to, someone whose work has become too heavy? These people need help, and we have been freed to see them as more than witnesses to our goodness.

3. FREEDOM DOES NOT MAKE HARM HARMLESS

At 5:13, Paul refuses the use of freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.

We can say that everything is forgiven when what we mean is that nobody should ask us to stop doing damage. That is the old self protecting itself with religious language.

Paul calls the community to serve one another through love. The neighbor's need is real, and so is the neighbor's vulnerability.

Grace does not require silence about harm. Forgiveness makes truthful confession possible because our future no longer depends upon successfully defending the indefensible.

We may acknowledge what we have done and attend to the person who has suffered from it.

4. BITING AND DEVOURING ONE ANOTHER

Paul's description in 5:15 is recognizable. People who belong to the same congregation can consume one another through rivalry, suspicion, and the determination to prevail.

The argument may surround an important issue. But something else can take hold of us. We begin needing the other person's defeat to confirm our own righteousness.

At that point, even correct convictions can become instruments of cruelty.

The Gospel exposes the burden we have placed upon the neighbor. That person's failure was never meant to be the foundation of our worth. Christ has already given us what we are trying to extract from the argument.

We are free to tell the truth without needing to destroy.

5. THE FLESH IS STILL PRESENT

Galatians 5:17 describes conflict between flesh and Spirit. Paul is speaking to Christians. He has not assumed that the old self has retired.

We still turn inward and ask how everything affects our importance.

The presence of this conflict can frighten people who expected conversion to produce a steady disappearance of struggle. Paul gives a more truthful account.

Our need for forgiveness remains. So does the Spirit's work. Christian maturity cannot mean becoming independent of Christ's mercy. The promise must continue to reach the person who discovers, once again, that the old defenses have returned.

6. PAUL'S WARNING MUST BE HEARD

The works of the flesh in 5:19–21 include envy and faction alongside more conspicuous forms of wrongdoing. Paul warns that those who practice such things will not inherit God's kingdom.

We should not soften that warning until it says nothing. These are destructive ways of life. They cannot be approved as expressions of the freedom Christ gives.

But the warning does not become a method by which we save ourselves through sufficient improvement. It accuses and calls our excuses to an end.

The sinner needs Christ. The same letter that names the danger directs us to the crucified Savior and the Spirit he gives. Both words do their work.

7. THE FRUIT BELONGS TO THE SPIRIT

Paul speaks of the Spirit's fruit in 5:22–23. The source matters.

We can turn the passage into a report card and ask whether our patience has improved enough to reassure us about our salvation. But then we have returned to the very calculation Paul has been confronting.

The fruit takes shape in life with others. Patience makes room for the person who cannot hurry. Kindness notices a need that our preoccupation had missed. Self-control protects someone from the consequences of our temper.

These gifts matter. We can encourage them and give thanks for them, but their presence does not add a missing piece to Christ's righteousness.

8. GETTING USED TO A LIFE WE RECEIVE

Sanctification remains the Spirit's work within the life of justification. It is not our independent contribution after God has done his part.

That helps us hear Paul's appeals without turning them into another contract.

We can learn to apologize more honestly. We can become more dependable in caring for someone. Such changes are welcome, and they often require correction and practical effort. But they cannot bear the weight of becoming our righteousness before God.

We live by returning to Christ. From there we return to the ordinary tasks in which our neighbor needs us. The task can be worthwhile without becoming a spiritual achievement we must display.

9. RESTORE THE PERSON GENTLY

At 6:1, Paul describes what should happen when someone is caught in a transgression. Those who are spiritual are to restore the person gently, mindful of their own vulnerability.

Does spiritual describe our elevated position above the fallen person? Paul makes it visible in gentleness toward that person.

Restoration includes truth. It may require stopping harmful conduct, making restitution, or accepting limits. The injured person must not be pressured into unsafe closeness to demonstrate forgiveness.

But the fallen person is not reduced to a permanent exhibit of failure. The community speaks mercy and works toward a future in which the harm does not continue.

10. BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

Then comes the summons to bear one another's burdens. A few verses later, Paul speaks of each person bearing their own load.

The two belong together. We have responsibilities that cannot simply be handed away. We also meet burdens that cannot be carried alone.

A congregation learns to distinguish them by attending to actual people. A grieving person may need a meal. A caregiver may need an afternoon of relief. Someone who has done wrong may need help taking responsibility without retreating into denial.

We do not need to discover a grand religious project before love can begin. There is already someone nearby whose burden has become too heavy.

11. SOWING AND REAPING

In 6:7–10, Paul insists that our actions have a direction and a harvest.

Freedom has not made the world unreal. What we do matters to those who live with us. The warning takes away our permission to call destructive conduct harmless merely because we speak about grace.

Paul also encourages the weary not to give up doing good. Love can be tiring, especially when results remain hidden and gratitude is scarce.

We are allowed to need help. The call to bear burdens includes the burden we ourselves are carrying. Receiving care does not disqualify us from the life of faith.

12. THE CROSS AND THE NEW CREATION

At the end of the letter, Paul returns to the cross. He has nothing else in which to boast. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision can establish the new creation.

The letter has come full circle. Christ gave himself for our sins. Christ is our life. The Spirit gives what our religious arrangements cannot produce.

Then Paul speaks grace to the people he has corrected so fiercely.

That must remain the church's final word too. We have named the sin. We have heard the call to serve. We have seen how readily we return to ourselves.

Christ has given himself for you.

His promise has not been withdrawn while we were discovering how much we still need it.

CLOSING

How does freedom in Christ differ from the freedom to do whatever we want?

What happens to the neighbor when our good works become evidence in the case we are making for ourselves?