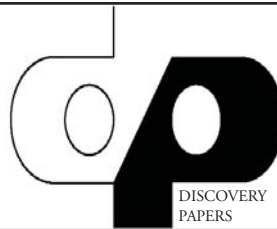


# LOVE FREEDOM, LOVE FREELY

*SERIES: FROM BUMPER CARS TO CARNIVAL  
SWINGS*



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Galatians 5  
5th Message  
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Freedom is a powerful word. In every culture, in every time, freedom is prized. It seems to stir something deep within us. We were meant to be free. And the book of Galatians is really a book about freedom. We've come a long way together and I've really been enjoying studying this book together as a church. Today we're going into the final stretch. These last two weeks we'll be looking at chapters 5 and 6—the last two chapters of Galatians. And as we do so, we'll see that the overarching theme in these chapters is one of freedom.

There's a great scene in the Disney movie *Aladdin* where Aladdin finally gives the genie his freedom. If you've seen the movie, you know that when Aladdin first found the genie, he promised him that he would use his last wish to grant the genie his freedom. But then as the story unfolds, Aladdin decides that he can't keep that promise because he needs the genie. He can't set him free because he needs to keep up a charade of acting like someone other than who he is. But finally, at the end of the movie, Aladdin fulfills his promise. The genie is set free, and it is something to celebrate.

As we've been studying Galatians, we've used the imagery of bumper cars and carnival swings. We've suggested that the world is entrenched in playing this game of competition and comparative worth. We've likened it to bumper cars. But the gospel frees us up from playing the game. Just like the genie, we are set free. The gospel frees us to live like carnival swings. But the freedom we gain isn't focused on ourselves but on loving others. Gospel freedom results in love.

My encouragement to us this morning is to love our freedom so that we can love freely. As we explore those ideas from Galatians 5, we're going to see two things that often get in the way of loving freely and two specific ways that we can learn to love freedom. So let's look at Galatians 5 together.

## Love Freedom

Chapter 5 opens with one of the most powerful statements about freedom in the whole Bible: *It was for freedom that Christ set you free!* And yet, throughout this chapter, Paul seems desperately concerned that these people in Galatia whom he loves so much might lose their freedom. You see, this book isn't written to people who aren't free. It is written to people who have been set free but are in danger of losing that freedom. So he wants to encourage them to value this freedom that they have and not to let anyone take it away from them. What he's talking about is mostly true for us, as well. We are a people who have been set free, and yet our freedom is constantly assaulted, and

we are in danger of losing it. So the first thing we can learn about freedom is that we need to love it. Love freedom.

At this point, you might be confused and think that I'm running for political office, not preaching the gospel to you. In our country, the idea that freedom can be lost is a familiar one. And the desire to protect, nurture, and defend our freedom turns into powerful rhetoric that gets people elected, starts wars, and changes the course of history. But what we are going to see is that the freedom we cherish so much as Americans is different from the freedom Paul wants for the Galatians. We have to start by loving our freedom—but loving this gospel freedom, which is a very different sort of freedom than what we celebrate here in America every Fourth of July.

Let's read Galatians 5:1-6 and see what this freedom that comes as a result of the gospel is all about.

**The reason Christ set you free was so that you could stay free. So guard your freedom carefully and don't let anyone make you a slave again. This is coming straight from me, from the mouth of Paul. If you cave in and get circumcised then you'll have severed your relationship with Christ. I'll say it again so that you are sure to get it. Anyone who gets circumcised will have to obey every last detail of the law. You push Christ away when you try to establish your place in God's kingdom by following the law. Grace becomes meaningless to you. Those of us who really know God in our spirits wait for Him to establish our place in His kingdom because our faith gives us hope. Because when you believe in Christ Jesus, it doesn't matter whether you are circumcised or whether you aren't circumcised. The only thing that makes a difference is your faith. And your faith is expressed when you love.**

Paul seems really concerned that the people in Galatia would lose this freedom that the gospel has given them. So we have to ask, how would they lose this freedom? It seems that one way you lose this freedom is by focusing on other people rather than God. Freedom is lost when you focus on other people. For the Gentiles in Galatia, getting circumcised was a way to focus on other people. Circumcision focused on the established social "in" group of the Jews out of a desire to be a part of that group rather than the new community of faith in Christ that had been established under God.

You have to understand that the Gentile Galatians were in really insecure social circumstances. When they became followers of Christ, they lost all of their social and civic legitimacy. Everything in their culture was wrapped up in

religion. For them to leave the Roman religious system was to disrupt their entire social network: family, friends, club members, business associates. Their membership in all of their groups was destroyed. So you can understand why it might be appealing to become a Jew: to fit into a standard category. For them to even consider going through the process of circumcision as an adult indicates that it must have had some serious benefits.

But once you focus on other people and let them determine your place in society or your worth as an individual, you are no longer free. Freedom is lost when you focus on other people. I see this play out in my own life in terms of who I'm trying to please. I tend to have what I call a monkey personality. I love to find someone who is in authority above me and then impress and dazzle him or her with how well I can perform. I can be like a little monkey, trying to impress somebody with my little tricks. Paul, the amazing monkey. I loved school because of all the teachers I could work really hard for and convince that I was something special. I loved working in software because I had managers I could work really hard for and convince that I was something special. But it turns out that ministry is a dangerous place to be a monkey. My role in ministry is not to get anyone to think that I'm something special but to help people understand that God thinks they are something special, and to help people see how amazing God is. So this is a battle I fight every day in ministry. My tendency is to perform for people and try to please them. My tendency is to focus on other people instead of God.

That's slavery. And the truth is that a lot of us live this way, desperately trying to prove ourselves to somebody, trying to make our lives look a certain way so that this person or that person will be happy with us, trying to belong in some group because we think that will make us feel better.

What about you? Let me ask you a simple question. Do you feel free? As you think about your regular interactions with people, are you free, or are you worried about what they think of you? Maybe there is an area of your life where you used to feel free, but it seems like that freedom has been lost somehow? Maybe a relationship with a parent or a spouse or a close friend or someone you work with? Once freedom is lost, it's hard to get it back.

Our freedom is lost when we focus on other people. So what happens for a lot of us is that we spend a bunch of time focusing on other people and then we get tired of it. We give up. We decide that we're just going to ignore everyone else. We think, "I'm done focusing on others—it's time to start focusing on myself." And so we just worry about our own experience. We just watch out for ourselves and make sure that our lives are going the way we want them to. But if God helps us, we usually end up seeing that this isn't really freedom either. We realize that freedom might be lost when we focus on other people, but freedom is abused when we focus on ourselves. So focusing on ourselves isn't loving freedom but abusing it.

Usually we think of freedom in terms of freedom from restrictions. When we focus on other people, we basically allow them to tell us what to do. That's slavery. So we think freedom is the absence of having to do what other people want us to do. The Webster dictionary defines freedom as "the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action." This is the freedom that we celebrate in America. The freedom to do what I please, say what I please, love whom I please, and act how I please.

This is a type of freedom, but it is not the highest form of freedom. When I went to college, I was aware that much of the world saw Christianity as an enslaving religion. They saw it as a system of rules and regulations that dictated all your behavior, essentially telling you what you could and couldn't do. And I knew my relationship with Christ to be so much more, so I desperately wanted to debunk their caricature of Christianity. So I made it a point to drink alcohol with my friends (once I was twenty-one), to smoke a cigar here and there, stuff like that. I wanted to prove that as a Christian I was free. And I was. And I am. But my understanding of freedom was a little shallow.

My understanding was that freedom just had to do with what I could do and couldn't do, that freedom was self-centered. What happens when we see our freedom as something that is just for us is that we get trapped into living for our experience. We start to use other people to make sure that we get what we want out of life. Listen to where Paul goes next as he talks about what happens when freedom is abused. Here are verses 19-21.

**It's obvious what living by natural principles and doing only what you want to do looks like. It's sexual promiscuity, being obsessed with sensuality, sleeping around, ignoring God completely, practicing magic, hating other people, always finding it hard to relate to people, wanting things that other people have, uncontrollable anger out of nowhere, competing with everyone all the time, choosing sides with other people, creating alliances to serve your own interests, not being happy with what you have, drinking all the time, eating uncontrollably and all sorts of similar things. I've told you about all of this before and warned you to be watchful of these things. People whose lives are characterized by these things don't have any place in the kingdom that God is establishing.**

Paul lists all these vices—sexual promiscuity, magic, envy, rage, competition, ambition. What do all of these things have in common? We usually think of these things simply as bad things that we do. All of these are moral sins. And that is true, but I want to suggest to us that each of these nineteen things that Paul lists has to do with relationship. Sexual promis-

cuity is using others sexually for your benefit. Uncontrollable anger is wanting to punish other people who have made your life something other than what you wanted it to be. Even the word for drunkenness here doesn't really refer to drinking alone, but social carousing—coming together as a group to use alcohol as an escape from your experience. Each one of these is a relational sin. One thing they have in common is that in some way, each of them is about using other people for my own benefit. Focusing on yourself abuses your freedom by using other people.

Earlier this week I saw a documentary called *Call and Response* about the prevalence of slavery in our modern world. People are enslaving others for the sex industry, for cheap labor, and for fighting in violent political regimes. We have several pastors in Thailand right now working with some of our missionaries who help to free women from the commercial sex industry. It strikes me that this is the highest form of living by natural principles. This is the highest form of abusing your own freedom: taking away the freedom of another. Using someone else for your own benefit, against his or her will. Now, I'm pretty sure that none of us in this room are enslaving other people to work in labor camps. But I'm even more sure that each and every one of us here ends up abusing our freedom by using other people for our own benefit in ways that are subtle but destructive to ourselves and each other.

We don't love freedom when we take away the freedom of another. Using other people is just another form of slavery for myself. It's slavery to my own experience. It's slavery to the fears and insecurities and desires that I have. Paul says that living by the Spirit fights against that slavery. The Spirit of Christ within me reacts against that slavery by fighting it, by fighting for my freedom. The Spirit of Christ begs me to love freedom. Not to lose my freedom by focusing on others, not to abuse my freedom by focusing on myself, but to love my freedom. And this is what the Spirit of Christ is inviting us into, here in this room. Love your freedom. Love freedom.

## Love Freely

Remember the movie clip I referred to in the beginning of this sermon? Aladdin made a wish for the genie's freedom. But if you follow the story, you realize that the real story is not about the genie's freedom. It's about Aladdin's freedom. He is that one that has been in bondage throughout the movie. It's not until the end, through the events of the movie, that he finally becomes free. And it's his freedom that is on center stage at the end of the movie, his freedom that finally allows him to grant freedom to the genie. It's his freedom that finally gets him the girl, the kingdom, and living happily ever after.

Without realizing it, this story of Aladdin demonstrates true freedom—freedom that allows us to love other people. The freedom that Christ experienced when He rose from the dead. The freedom that Christ invites us into when

we follow Him. And it's this freedom that finally lets us be the bride, welcomes us into the kingdom, and promises us eternal life forever and ever. And it's this freedom that allows us to love. Paul says this clearly in verses 13-14.

**When God reached out to you, brothers and sisters, he did it to free you. But don't turn the freedom that God gave you into an excuse to do whatever you want to do. Instead, use your freedom to serve one other by loving each other. That's what the Law is about anyway. The main idea is simple: love everyone else in the same way that you love yourself.**

This freedom that Paul wants us to experience is a freedom to love someone else. When we focus on other people, we lose that freedom, when we focus on ourselves we abuse that freedom. But when we focus on God—when we see Him as what defines our place in society—we are free to love freely. We love freely when we focus on God.

In the last part of chapter 5, Paul starts talking about this freedom in love. He introduces this new phrase. The NIV translates it "live by the Spirit," the NASB is more literal and translates it, "walk by the Spirit." Paul goes on to describe the difference between living by the flesh and living by the Spirit. Basically, this living or walking by the Spirit amounts to focusing on God. Not other people. Not yourself, but God.

However, when I think about walking with the Spirit, I have in my mind a caricature of the super-spiritual Christian. This person prays eloquently. They get up early in the morning to read their Bible faithfully. They seem so holy and always talk about what God is doing in their life. You see, we usually think of walking by the Spirit as basically referring to some type of individual personal spirituality. In fact, I think my caricature of the deeply spiritual person is actually one that is kind of distant from other people, kind of a loner, off by himself. Maybe he even has trouble relating to other people because he is so spiritual.

But I'm convinced that that isn't what Paul is talking about here. When he starts talking about the fruit of the Spirit, it looks to me like every single one of the fruits he lists is relational. They are all about interactions with other people. So what does that mean? It means that living by the Spirit means loving freely. Living by the Spirit is played out in my relationships with others.

We usually read this list as a list of a list of nine character traits. But I think it's possible to read it as saying that the fruit of the Spirit is love, and the next eight words describe what love really looks like. Listen to my translation of Gal 5:22-26.

**But when you live your life in relationship to God through His Spirit, you are finally able to love people. You show grace to everyone, you're always trying to reduce conflict rather than incite it, you're patient with people who drive you crazy, your kind to everyone even when you're hurt by them, you do good to people you don't even know, you can be counted on by**



**your friends and family, you care about other people's feelings when you interact with them, and you're able to avoid doing things that you really want to do but that you know would hurt someone. When your life looks like this, you don't need a law because you don't want to stop any of these behaviors. When you believed in Jesus Christ, you took your natural desires and put them on the cross with Him, along with all your lusts and selfish passions. So when we live our lives in relationship to God through His Spirit, our behavior will match the character of God. We won't put ourselves above anyone, we won't try to put anyone else down, and we won't want what God has given to someone else.**

We see that this spiritual life, this walking by the Spirit, is manifested in a deeply relational life. The fruit of the Spirit is healthy relationships. If this is true, then it is a completely different paradigm of spirituality than what I usually think of. It means that loving God is loving other people. I used to hear people talk about having relational hierarchies, and they would say things like, "My relationship with God needs to come before my relationship with anyone else." As a man, I'm supposed to love God first, then my wife, then my children, then my college students, etc. But I don't find that way of thinking particularly helpful. What does it mean to love God? Does it mean reading my Bible? Or spending time alone with him? That's part of it. But don't I love God when I love my wife? Don't I love God when I love my children? Don't I love God when I love all of you? My love for God is played out in my love for people. Separating out these priorities makes me feel like reading my Bible in the morning is loving God and taking my wife out on a date is loving my wife. But that's not the way it is. The fruit of the Spirit is love...for others.

I think one of the reasons that we tend to think of spirituality as being alone and isolated goes back to what we said about fences. We generally think of pleasing God in terms of not sinning. God will be happy with me if I avoid sin. The problem is that whenever we try to love other people, we will end up hurting them. We are fallen people and our attempts at love will always, always, always, until Jesus redeems us, be tainted by sin. So if your goal is to avoid sin at all costs, then the best way to achieve that is to go off by yourself, because then you have the least likelihood of sinning. But God isn't pleased by our not sinning. He's pleased by our love.

The fruit of the Spirit isn't less envy, less anger, less lust, etc. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. And when you're loving someone, it's really hard to also be envious. When you are expressing joy to another person, it's really hard to also be angry. When you are relating to another in self-control, it's really hard to also lust after them. So the fruit of the Spirit isn't sinning less. You can sin less and not be loving at all. The fruit of the Spirit is loving more. The goal of the Christian life isn't to avoid sin but to love. Jesus didn't say the greatest commandment was to read your Bible and try not to hurt people. But we often make it sound that way. Our goal should be to love more, not sin less.

Our spirituality is lived out when we love freely. Well, there are two groups of people that are often particularly difficult to love. And I'd like to suggest something. Instead of seeing these people as obstacles to our spirituality, I want to suggest that we see them as opportunities to learn to focus on God and grow in love for others. They are not obstacles to our spirituality but opportunities.

First, love freely by loving different people. Love different people freely. This is what was hard for the Galatians. They couldn't deal with the difference of Jew and Gentile in the same community, so they were trying to all become the same. But loving freely means loving people amidst our differences, not taking away our differences. Not retreating into subgroups where we're all the same, but loving people amidst differences. And this is hard. It's hard to love someone different from me—all sorts of misunderstandings and complications arise. But this is an area where we can learn to love freely.

If you're a student, get to know some non-students and try to learn to love them. If you're a young adult, get to know some older folks and try to learn to love them. If you're an older person, get involved in junior high ministry and start trying to love the junior highers. If you're part of the main congregation, show up at R&R on Friday night and try to love that group. Learn to love freely by loving different people.

Love different people freely. But we can also learn to love freely by loving the same people for a long time. Love the same people freely. Why is it so hard for people to stay married? And to stay married well? Because it's hard to love the same person for any length of time. What happens when you get to know someone better and better? You get to know what is hard about relating to them. So as relationships progress and deepen, it gets harder and harder to love. Just ask my wife. I think when we started dating she had a fairly easy time loving me. These days, I think she finds me a lot harder to love. And for good reason. She knows more and more of the real me. As people get to know us better, they learn more of the darkness within our hearts.

Our culture makes it difficult to love the same people. We live in what has been called a "thin community." We go to church with some people, we go to school with other people, we work with another set of people, we live around another set of people, we play racquetball or go biking or fishing or whatever with another set of people. Our relational lives are fragmented. And they are short-term. We move around, we change churches if we don't like the music or the college pastor, we upgrade to better houses, we upgrade to better jobs. Everything is transient. We're always around a different set of people, so we never really have to go deep in love.

But perhaps one way we might stand against the culture is to think about long-term relationships as critical to our spiritual development. Maybe they need to factor into your decisions a little more highly. I'm not suggesting that you never move or never disrupt your relationships; there are certainly good reasons for those things. But long-term

relationships factor pretty low on most people's priority list. I think the gospel invites us to give them a little more importance.

What might all this mean for you? How is God asking you to love different people? How might you cross some boundaries to love different people?

How is God asking you to love the same people? How might you narrow your circles a bit to love the same people?

The gospel frees us up to love freely. And we can learn to love freely especially in relationships where we have to go deeper, where relationships are challenging. These types of relationships are the ones that literally send us to our knees, struggling to connect with God so that we can love other people. We'll never become better lovers if we only love people who are just like us and then trade them for other people when those relationships get difficult. Love freely. Learn to love different people. Learn to love the same people.

Freedom and love go together. When Aladdin felt trapped by the need to convince others that he was really a prince, he couldn't love. He couldn't really love the princess, he couldn't really love the genie by keeping his promise to him. He was trapped. But something happened for him that freed him up. And when he found that freedom, he was free to love. He was free to love the genie by granting him his freedom. And then he received the freedom to love the princess. Freedom and love are intimately connected.

This whole book of Galatians has been moving toward this place of showing us how we are freed up to love each other. Paul wants more than anything to see this young church in Galatia grow into a vibrant, diverse community where people are committed to each other amidst their differences and where freedom and love grow together because of the gospel. Next week, we'll talk about some specific areas where loving gets hard: how to handle it when someone else abuses his freedom, how to deal with needs within this loving family, how to handle your financial resources within this family.

But today we want to think about freedom. At one point, Jesus asked someone if he wanted to be healed. And I think that's the question before us. Do we want to be free? For me the answer is mixed. I want more than anything to be free, but I'm also so comforted by my slavery to other people and slavery to myself. I need God to draw me up to Himself. I need God to help me to focus on Him so that I can really love this freedom that He's given me and so that I can freely love these people whose lives he has called me to be a part of.

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