

True Freedom: Accept No Imitations

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[0 : 00] Okay, I've recently been reading Margaret Atwood's book, *The Handmaid's Tale*. It's not my book, just to let you know, I live with an English teacher, so it's her book, and I've just been looking at it.

And you may know the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale*. If you don't, don't worry, no spoilers will be coming because I haven't finished it yet. You may even have seen the dramatization of *The Handmaid's Tale* on TV.

But *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian story about the future set in a place called Gilead, which is a theocratic and totalitarian state.

And it's based in the United States of America. And it's ruled by really a fundamentalist regime, like a pseudo-Christian sect. And it's called the Sons of Jacob.

And women are treated as the property of the state. They're not even allowed to read in this regime. And the story is narrated by Offred, who's one of the handmaids.

[1 : 01] And handmaids are basically slaves to their religious owners. And their sole purpose or their role in life is really to breed children for their owners.

And so Offred is forced to serve the commander and his wife. And her freedom, like the freedom of all the women in Gilead, is completely restricted. So she's only allowed to leave the house once a day to walk to the supermarket.

And the eyes, which are Gilead's secret police, watch her every public move. And so *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays this really frightening and disturbing fictional world.

But in doing so, it forces us to think about our own world. Because it makes us think about what does it mean to be free? What is freedom? And what is slavery?

And in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it really shows how religion can be used to take freedom away. And so Margaret Atwood, in an interview for the *New York Times*, she said, The book is not anti-religion, but it is against the use of religion as a front for tyranny.

[2 : 11] I guess she's basically saying religion can be used to enslave people. And so we're left asking, if we look at the book, or even if we haven't read it, we're just left asking, What does it mean to really be free in our culture today?

In the book, Offred isn't free. She wants to escape her world of slavery. And we might think that those who rule over her, well, they're free. But actually, these religious leaders, they're also slaves to their fundamentalist regime.

And so when it comes to freedom, and where freedom is to be found, I think *The Handmaid's Tale* actually gets it right. Because any kind of distorted or twisted form of Christianity will never give real true freedom.

And that's why any distorted form of Christianity should always be rejected and dismissed. But at the same time, in our culture today, rejecting true Christianity isn't the pathway to freedom.

But that is what most people think. If you get rid of God and you get rid of rules, then we'll be truly free. But not everything that promises freedom in today's secular world is able to deliver.

[3 : 24] If you think about our culture, which is one of individualism, we're told that if you want to be free, then you just need to be true to yourself. You need to follow the desires of your heart.

But does that make us really free? Or do we end up just being slaves to the culture? Whereby we're forced to think, we're forced to live out, and we're forced to identify with whatever the current cultural trend is.

And there's a sense in which we are enslaved because if we step outside what the normal culture says we should do, then we think that we will... And yet we're just slaves.

We're slaves to the culture. But rather than be enslaved to the culture, rather than let the culture around us squeeze us into its mold, what we get in the good news of Jesus Christ or the gospel, the word that we read in Galatians, what we get is a freedom.

A freedom that means we're no longer enslaved to living in this world, and we're no longer enslaved to obeying lots of religious rules. But we're free because God has set us free to live for Him.

[4 : 38] And so while people are longing for freedom today, we should be asking, well, where is freedom to be found? And Paul, in this letter to the Galatians, he tells us that true freedom is only to be found in Jesus Christ.

And that's why we've called our series True Freedom. Freedom is mentioned again and again and again in this letter. I counted to 10 references to freedom. You can look through and see if you can find any more.

And there are even more references to slavery or being a slave. And so it's clear that Paul repeats these terms, freedom and slavery, because he wants his readers to know true freedom.

And he wants his readers to know, whether back then or us today, that freedom, real freedom, is to be found in Jesus Christ. And so that's really the context of the letter.

So let me just give you a couple of verses to help us get our bearings. If you have your Bible, just over the page, chapter 2, verse 4 says this. This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.

[5 : 50] And then chapter 5, verse 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.

Okay, so there was clearly a problem to the people that Paul was writing to. These Galatians, these Christians, Gentile Christians, were in danger of losing their freedom in Christ and becoming slaves again.

Well, why? Well, because, as we will discover as we read it, there were some false teachers and they were promoting a distorted version of Christianity.

And so the Apostle Paul writes to defend himself and he writes to defend his gospel. That is the good news of Jesus Christ to these people. And so our opening words help us to see this.

Let me read them, verse 1 and 2. Paul, an apostle sent not from men nor by a man, but sent by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

[6 : 54] And all the brothers and sisters with me to the churches in Galatia. So Paul begins by stating that he is an apostle. Apostle simply means messenger.

And it's used of those people who were chosen by Jesus and commissioned by Jesus to go out into the world as his messengers to tell all that they had seen about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And so Paul's asserting his authority as an apostle, because as we will discover in chapters 1 and 2 of Galatians, his authority was being undermined.

And so before Paul begins to deconstruct this false teaching, which was enslaving the Galatians, Paul has to defend himself and his credentials to these Galatian Christians.

So Paul says he was sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead. So the risen Jesus met the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus and then sent him out.

[8 : 00] And so Paul is saying here that he is equal with all the other apostles. He had divine authority to proclaim a divine message, a message that came from God.

And so one thing to remember when we look at the book of Galatians is the direction of travel. The direction of travel is always from God to us. So the apostle Paul comes with a message.

It's not a human message made up by men, but it comes from God, and it flows down to us through apostles like Paul. So in other words, Paul's saying he is the official spokesman for Jesus, unlike the false teachers who are making up their own message and were confusing people.

Okay, so the apostle Paul, and he's written this letter to the churches in Galatia. Now, Galatia was a Roman province in what we now today know as Turkey.

You may have been to Turkey for your holidays. Nice place. And Paul had planted several churches in this region on his first missionary journey. And so this is probably a circular letter.

[9 : 09] So it was to go to all the churches that he had planted. And the date the scholars think this letter was written was about A.D. 50. And it really tackles one of the big issues that the church had to wrestle with, and that is the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

Because these Galatians were in danger because some Jews were trying to Judaize them. And that's why these false teachers are often called the Judaizers.

It's because they wanted to turn Gentile believers into Jews. So they were basically saying that, yes, you should have faith in Jesus Christ, but it's got to be faith in Jesus Christ plus an observance of the Jewish rules and rituals, such as circumcision.

And circumcision is the big issue in Galatians. Paul mentions it constantly throughout the letter. And so as Paul concludes his letter, he says, chapter 6, verse 12, that some of these people, these false teachers, are trying to compel you to be circumcised.

Okay, so a controversy on circumcision is clearly removed from us today. We don't really care about what was happening with circumcision way back then. And yet, the letter to the Galatians takes us to the very core or to the very heart of Christianity, because it is about how you and I relate to God.

[10 : 45] It's speaking about our relationship with God, which is something that we all need to consider, whether we're here today and we call ourselves a Christian, or whether we wouldn't call ourselves a Christian, and we just wonder what this Christianity stuff is all about.

This letter helps us to see that it is about how we relate to God. And remember the direction. God gives a message down to us.

It all comes from up. It all comes down from above, should I say. And that is really the idea of grace. Grace is about what God does for us, not about what we do for Him.

And so this letter is teaching us about God's grace. We relate to God on the basis of what He's done for us in sending His Son, Jesus Christ. Because God accepts us, not through our own efforts, not through the good things that we do to try and please God.

God accepts us because of what Jesus Christ has done. Okay, so Paul, he rebukes these Galatians, and he reminds them that they're justified by faith in Jesus.

[11 : 56] They're put right with God through believing in Jesus Christ, not by observing the law, not by keeping rules and rituals or getting circumcised, because Paul's saying doing all these things is really just a form of slavery.

You've been set free by Jesus, so don't become a slave again by thinking you need to do all these things, and then God will accept you. So Galatians is teaching us only true Christianity can give us true freedom.

So for the rest of our time, that's just all by way of introduction, two things to see. True Christianity saves, verse 3 to 5, and second, distorted Christianity condemns, in verse 6 to 9.

So first, true Christianity saves. Paul essentially summarizes Christianity in these verses, in these opening words, verse 3 to 5. So if you're wondering, I just don't get this Christian thing.

This is a great summary. It's concise, but it's expansive. It's enough to help us grasp what's at the heart of Christianity.

[13 : 02] So let me read those verses again, 3 to 5. 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 forever and ever.

Amen. Okay, so Paul greets his readers with these two words, grace and peace, not just a formality in writing a letter back then, because grace describes the undeserved favor that God lavishes on us in Jesus Christ.

So God lavishes his grace on us by sending Jesus to us. Remember that direction, from God to us. And then peace is the result of what happens when we respond to God's grace towards us.

When we believe in Jesus Christ, then we have peace with God. We're no longer separated from him, but we're welcomed to him. And so when we respond to God's grace by believing in Jesus, we have peace with the God who made us.

And so this grace and this peace are grounded, Paul says, in the death of Jesus. So Paul expands on this by giving a really, just the gospel or the good news of Jesus in a nutshell.

[14 : 29] And let's just break down what he says. So the first thing he says is the Lord Jesus Christ. The title he gives Jesus is Lord. So Jesus, he's saying, isn't a man.

He is the Lord of all. He lived, he died on earth, but he is Lord, the divine Son of God. Which makes what Paul says next astounding, because he says, the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself.

So Jesus came into this world to give up his life to die. And so the death of Jesus was no accident. It was a willing self-sacrifice.

Why did Jesus sacrifice his life? Paul goes on, the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins. Jesus died for our sins.

And we all sin, every single one of us, in thought, in word, in deed. And our sins are an offense to God. So they're a problem because they separate us from God.

[15 : 35] And so we deserve to be punished for our sins. We deserve God's punishment for our rebellion against him. But Christianity is called the gospel or the good news because the good news is that the Lord Jesus Christ came and willingly died for our sins.

And that's why we should never think that the death of Jesus is primarily a good example of love. Although it is a good example of love.

But the death of Jesus is fundamentally a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus sacrificed himself and he suffered the penalty taking the punishment on the cross that we deserve for our sins.

But there's more. Paul goes on, the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age. He's really saying that Christianity is a rescue mission where we are the ones who are desperately in need of rescue.

And Jesus came to rescue us from what? He came to rescue us from the present evil age. Well, what does that mean? How is this age the present evil age?

[16 : 55] Paul's talking about the world that we are living in, this world. And it is a world that is opposed to God and it's a world that is corrupted by sin.

And you just need to look around you in society today to see that this is a world opposed to God. You just need to watch the news to see there is sin and evil and the whole place is a mess.

And the reason is the human race. You and I, all who have ever lived, have turned our backs on God. And so there are consequences to our rebellion and the consequences are disastrous as we see them being played out on the news.

And so that's the present evil age. But when Jesus came into this world from heaven to earth, a new age arrived.

And so these ages overlap and they currently run in parallel with one another. So the present evil age continues. Jesus came, there's the overlap and the new age can be an age that we live in right now whilst being in this present evil age.

[18 : 10] And so being a Christian is someone who has been rescued from the present evil age and has been delivered into this age to come. Maybe just to help us think through what that means, we prayed in the Lord's Prayer, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So we're praying about this new age that came with the arrival of Jesus. And in the Lord's Prayer, we prayed, deliver us from evil. And so, because Jesus came, he sets us free from this present evil age by rescuing us, taking away our sins so that we're no longer enslaved to this present evil age, but we've been delivered from it so that we are part of an age to come.

Basically, we've been taken out of the kingdom of this world and we have been put into, delivered, rescued into the kingdom of God. One commentator calls it the emancipation from a state of bondage, being enslaved and then being rescued.

And then Paul says, 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. And so he's saying all of this was part of God's plan.

God had a rescue plan and he has been operational in making that rescue plan happen in history. And that's why Paul says, verse 5, that God deserves glory forever and ever.

[19 : 43] And so, when we get into this letter, Paul's really saying that if anyone else teaches a different message, a different kind of Christianity, Christianity, a distorted version of what he has just said, or if anyone thinks that they can be rescued or be accepted by God through doing things instead of accepting what God has done for us, then that's not Christianity.

And so Paul is writing because the Galatians needed to hear that God doesn't accept them by the things that they do. God accepts them because he has come in the person of his son on a rescue mission to save us.

So the Galatians needed to hear that and I wonder whether there are some who are here today who need to hear that too. Well, the only way that we can be rescued is through the death of Jesus for our sins.

Because Christianity is different from every other religion and it's different from every other worldview. Christianity is saying God comes to a rescue.

Remember the direction? God comes down to rescue us. Every other religion is saying you have to try hard, do well in order to be accepted, in order to obtain your salvation.

[21 : 08] You get there if you're good enough, if you do enough. Let me try and illustrate. Last month, we witnessed the large-scale evacuations from Afghanistan.

We've all seen that on our news. The U.S. forces, you know, withdrew from Afghanistan and then the Taliban took over and thousands of people were rescued and they were flown out by these airplanes that came in and out of Kabul airport, taking as many people into these planes as they possibly could.

and people were desperate to escape Afghanistan. And the reason they were desperate to escape Afghanistan was that they knew if they did not escape before the Taliban took control, then they would be enslaved.

They would be stuck in an evil regime and life would be awful. And so wasn't it great to see all those airplanes, pictures of the soldiers, pictures of all these smiling people, crammed into an airplane, chock full of people, knowing that they were being saved, knowing that they were being rescued and taken out of Afghanistan.

But at the same time, wasn't it so tragic to see all these people desperate to get away from this enslaving regime of the Taliban, even willing to hang onto the airplane and risk their lives and die because it would be so bad being in that place.

[22 : 38] They wanted to be free. And equally tragic, isn't it, to know that there are many, many more people still in Afghanistan right now who know their need of rescue, but there's nobody who is coming to their rescue.

And so unlike the people of Afghanistan, I think many people today don't realize the danger that they're in. They certainly know the danger they're in in Afghanistan, but today people don't realize their danger and their need of rescue.

And Jesus is the one who, if you like, comes down into our world to rescue us, to take us out and deliver us and to take us into the kingdom of God.

And so at the start of this letter, Paul is essentially summarizing that this is the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel. He's telling us we deserve God's condemnation for our sins.

We are enslaved to this present evil age. And the thing is, unless we realize the danger that we're in, then we'll never see our need of rescue.

[23 : 47] And yet the good news is that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is our rescue if we are willing to receive it. It's our deliverance.

It's our liberation. It's our freedom. So that's the first thing true Christianity saves. And that's what Paul is articulating here. The second thing is that distorted Christianity condemns, verse 6 to 9.

In Paul's letters, it's his standard practice to give thanks for the people he's writing to. It's great to say that in any letter. Thank you. You're great. You're amazing. But Paul doesn't do that here.

There's no thanksgiving. So he skips from his normal pattern in letter writing to get straight down to business. The situation was so serious that Paul starts not with thanksgiving but with a rebuke because the Galatians were deserting the gospel.

The reason they were deserting the gospel was because these false teachers were perverting the gospel. And so what Paul does is he comes to defend the gospel.

[24 : 53] Remember, gospel just means good news of Jesus. And so let's see what Paul says. He says, I am astonished. This is verse 6. I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all.

So the Galatians received this message, this gospel from Paul and now they were deserting it. They were being offered a different gospel by the false teachers believers.

But Paul has to make it clear that there is no different gospel. There is no other message. There is true Christianity and everything else is a twisted, perverted distortion.

So anything that adds to Paul's message or anything that takes away from Paul's message isn't the message of Christianity. It's a distortion. And so Paul is saying to them by deserting this message, by deserting the good news of Jesus Christ, you Galatians are actually deserting God himself.

And that's how serious this situation was. To put it in Star Wars terms, if you like, they were going over to the dark side. That's what's happening. And so Paul's letter to the Galatians is a strong and urgent plea to stop them before they go all the way.

[26 : 20] Because the word for deserting in verse 6 here is a verb in the present tense which indicates that the Galatians had started to turn away but they had not fully turned away.

So they were deserting but there's still hope for them. And that's why Paul is writing. They were deserting but these false teachers were perverting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So verse 7 says evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. Paul's talking about people who weren't just deluded but they were dangerous.

So their message wasn't the gospel. It wasn't true Christianity. In fact, it was the opposite. So literally the word translated here as pervert means to turn into or to reverse.

And so Paul by insisting that the Gentile Christians must be circumcised to be proper Christians, these false teachers were reversing the gospel, reversing the message of Christianity, distorting it and turning it into something that it isn't, into something else.

[27 : 35] So they'd essentially, these false teachers turned the whole thing back to front or upside down and it was causing trouble and it was causing confusion amongst these churches.

And yet, this perverting of the gospel of Jesus Christ continues to be a big danger today. It happens in churches where people teach or tolerate a distorted and twisted version of Christianity where the message of Christianity is turned into a message of self-salvation where to get right with God you've got to do it through your own efforts, through your religious devotion, through your good works.

So remember Paul's message from God to us, grace, God does it in coming to us in Jesus Christ but the other message that's out there is no, you do it your way, you live a good life, you do good works, you go to church every week and then God will accept you.

And yet that is the exact opposite of true Christianity where God through his grace saves us because of what Jesus has done.

So anything the letter of Galatians is telling us that puts the emphasis on my efforts as a human being to do enough so that God will accept me is wrong.

[29 : 03] It distorts the message of Christianity which is about God and his grace doing for us what we need done which is to be rescued.

And this is so serious that Paul's words are strong. Verse 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you let them be under God's curse.

Imagine people as they read this did Paul really say that? Did he just say that people should be cursed or condemned? Well Paul goes on again just in case they didn't get it.

Second time verse 9 As we have already said so now I say again if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted let them be under God's curse.

He uses the word anathema and it means to be under God's curse. It means to be devoted to destruction. And so Paul's saying anybody who preaches a different message should be condemned to hell.

[30 : 05] Not only that Paul's saying even if I preach a different message a different gospel I should be condemned too. And then he goes on and he says even if an angel just turns up in church one Sunday preaches a different message to the one that Paul preached that we find in our Bibles he says kick the angel out and they should be condemned as well.

And these are strong words but that is how certain Paul is that the good news he preached to the Galatians is true. It's true. It is the only thing that offers hope to us as a human race.

Every other message when it comes to how we relate to God won't work and is false. And that's why anyone who peddles a different message to the one that we find in our Bibles deserves condemnation.

And so we should never be so naive as to think that whatever comes out of a preacher's mouth from the front of church is true. We shouldn't be dazzled by the person or their ability or their influence or the books they've written or their ecclesiastical position.

It doesn't matter if they're a reverent or a right reverent or a very reverent or a super turbocharged reverent or a moderator a bishop or an archbishop what Paul is saying if they teach something different than the message he received from God then they should be condemned.

[31 : 44] And so I guess that's how to judge anyone including me is what I am saying to you found in the Bible if it isn't reject me and kick me out the window.

That's what Paul's saying. That's how serious this is. This message is a true message and the stakes are high. And we might be wondering well Paul just take a chill pill like calm it a bit.

Why is he being so serious? Why make such a big deal of this? Paul seems to be making everything black and white. There's no shades of grey. It's so binary and he's so intolerant of people who have a different opinion.

And that is everything our culture hates these days isn't it? Black, white, binary intolerance. And the reason is the stakes could not be higher.

My eternal destiny, your eternal destiny depends on how we respond to this message about Jesus Christ. Let me try and illustrate.

[32 : 55] There are plenty of drug dealers out there in Glasgow. They're all over the place. And they're out there, so many of them, to target young people. Because if they can get young people addicted to drugs, then they know that they've got a long stream of income for years to come.

If they can get them hooked. And they don't care that the drugs are dangerous or disruptive or destroy people's lives. And so surely what we want is, well, we want dealers to be caught, we want them to go to court, we want them to be judged, and ultimately we'd be happy if they ended up in prison.

And that isn't harsh, is it, to want that to happen, given the damage that they do to people in society. And so that's why Paul's essentially saying here, we can't tolerate false teachers, we can't tolerate false teaching, any more than you and I would tolerate drug dealers and their drugs.

The fact is, distorted Christianity condemns people. It is destructive, it is dangerous, and only true Christianity saves people.

And that is what God offers to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus came and offered himself, he gave himself for our sins, so that we can be saved, not through anything that we do, but through what Jesus has done for us.

[34 : 28] And that's why there is true freedom in Jesus Christ. And so if we reject Jesus Christ, we'll either be enslaved to religious rules, or we will be enslaved to sin.

So we'll be enslaved to religious rules, if we're religious, but the opposite of being religious is being irreligious. And so we'll be enslaved to sin if we're irreligious.

And the stakes are high because we're talking about slavery and freedom. We're talking about being condemned by God and being accepted by God.

And so what Paul says here is strong and it's stark because there is nothing more important for us in life than how you or I relate to the God who made us.

And I guess we like to think that we're accepted by God through the things that we do. Surely if I live a good enough life, God's bound to want me.

[35 : 35] Surely he will accept me as I am because I'm such a good guy or good girl and look at all the good things I've done. And that is the default position of every human heart.

Because in the world out there you're accepted on the basis of what you do. Other people like you, love you, admire you, if you can prove yourself.

If you can prove how good you are, you'll be accepted. And yet the good news of Christianity is that we can never be good enough and yet God accepts us anyway.

Not because we can achieve anything or prove ourselves enough to him, but because he came to rescue us in his son, Jesus Christ.

And so with God we're accepted as we are through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And that is why Christianity is such good news, because the direction is grace from God to us.

[36 : 39] It's through God's grace that we are saved and it's through God's grace that we discover true freedom in life. God's grace for who you are well ■ into your hyenas to his sons again the Titans.

God work it's good to death by our heart that we are in our lucky love to us the seaJa and though