

True Freedom: Fighting for Freedom

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[0:00] Amen. Okay, just a bit of Second World War history. On the 31st of March 1939, the Prime Minister, who was Neville Chamberlain at the time, as I'm sure you know, he informed the House of Commons that Britain would support Poland against any action that threatened its independence.

And this guarantee, essentially, by Neville Chamberlain was really Britain declaring war on Nazi Germany, and that happened six months later. And this is what Winston Churchill said about that House of Commons decision. He said, if you will not fight for the right when you can easily win without bloodshed, if you will not fight when your victory will be sure and not too costly, you may come to the moment when you will have to fight with all the odds against you and only a small chance of survival. There may even be a worst case, you may have to fight when there is no hope of victory, because it is better to perish than to live as slaves. That was Winston Churchill in his book, *The Gathering Storm*, about the Second World War. So Churchill believed that the decision to fight against the Nazis, against Germany, should have been made sooner, when it was easier to stop Germany from taking over Poland. Essentially, Winston Churchill was saying that freedom is worth fighting for. And I'm sure that we'd all agree, nobody wants to be a slave, nobody wants to see people enslaved, we want to be free, and we want those who are trapped to be free as well. And if we don't fight for freedom, then we may end up being slaves. That's essentially what Winston Churchill was saying.

And so we've called our series in Paul's letter to the Galatians, True Freedom. True Freedom, because the Galatian Christians were in danger of losing their freedom and becoming slaves. And that's the context of this letter. So just listen to Paul's words again from chapter 2, verse 4 and 5. He says, this matter arose because some false teachers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. So here is Paul, and he's saying that the truth of the gospel is something worth fighting for. And the reason he's saying it's worth fighting for is that the Galatian Christians are about to lose this freedom that they have in Jesus. So the question is, well, what do you need to become a Christian? And the answer is you need faith in Jesus. That's all that's needed to become a

Christian. So when we talk about becoming a Christian, it's not do all these things and then you become one. It is faith in Jesus. God meets us with grace. He welcomes us to himself. He accepts us, not through anything we do, but through what he's done for us in Jesus Christ. But in Galatians, what we read about are false teachers who were wanting to Judaize Gentile believers. In other words, they were wanting to turn them into Jews, saying that you can have faith in Jesus, of course, but you also need to follow all these Jewish customs if you're going to be a proper Christian.

They're saying faith in Jesus isn't enough. You need to become like a Jew. And becoming like a Jew meant all sorts of things, including circumcision. And these Galatians, they were in danger of listening to the false teachers and taking on this unnecessary burden of following all these rules and regulations, which was in effect enslaving them. They were becoming slaves again, even though they should have been free in Jesus Christ.

And so they were turning from the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus to something that was no gospel at all. And that's why the message of Galatians is ever relevant, because it takes us to the very heart, to the core, to the center of Christianity, because Christianity is really about having faith in Jesus Christ. That's how God accepts us. We relate to God, not by doing a whole load of good works and good things, but we relate to God through faith in Jesus. And so what happens in these verses, chapter 2, verse 1 to 10, is the apostle Paul goes to Jerusalem and he's fighting for the truth of the gospel. And so when we read the word gospel, gospel simply means good news. So don't be confused by gospel thinking as a strange term. It means good news, the good news of Jesus. And

so two things, just for us to look at this afternoon, the good news of Jesus gives true freedom, and that's in verse 1 to 5. And then secondly, the good news establishes true unity, and that's in verse 6 to 10. So the first point, the good news gives true freedom. The truth of the gospel, the message of Jesus was under attack in Galatia, and that's why Paul went to Jerusalem. And so in chapter 2, he's writing in autobiographical mode. He was talking about his life before from halfway through chapter 1 into chapter 2. He's giving his testimony, his life story, if you like. And what he's doing is he's describing what happened on his visit. So we read that after 14 years, I went up, Paul, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation, and meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. So this is 14 years after his first visit. Why did he go? Well, Paul wasn't summoned by the other apostles. They weren't saying to him, Paul, come to us because we've been hearing there's some issues with your message. So come and tell us what you're talking about so we can check it out, we can affirm it, we can correct it. Now, he wasn't going because he was summoned to go. Paul says that he went to Jerusalem in response to a revelation from God. So God told him to go, and he did. And then he took Barnabas, and he took this other man, Titus, with him. And he had a private meeting with all the leaders to then tell them the message that he was preaching and teaching to Gentiles. And Paul wanted to make sure, he says, he wasn't running and had not been running in vain. What does he mean? Did he have doubts about whether he was really preaching the true message of Jesus? No, not at all, because Paul received his message from Jesus himself. It was revealed to him. So Paul was teaching and preaching the true message of Jesus. So he didn't need any reassurance from the Jerusalem apostles.

[7 : 12] But what he did need was for them to stand alongside him in declaring and uniting around this message, this gospel. Because Paul feared that his ministry would have been hindered if these Jerusalem apostles, these leaders, didn't take a strong stand against all this false teaching that was urging the Gentiles to adhere to all these Jewish laws. And so if they didn't stand together for this gospel of grace alone, through faith alone, and Jesus Christ alone, it would have been a disaster for the early church. It would have been like scoring an own goal, having two factions, two sides, divided over what is the core and essence of Christianity. And it would have split the church because it was having two different messages. On the one hand, you had Paul saying that it is faith in Jesus alone that saves.

And then you had this other message from the false teachers, and it was saying, yes, faith in Jesus, but you also need to observe all these Jewish laws, like circumcision and all these other kinds of ceremonial laws. And that's how you're a proper Christian. That's how you're saved. But this wasn't just a kind of theoretical or abstract thing, because Paul takes this guy Titus with him. Verse 3, yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. So Paul taking Titus with him was a bold move, because Paul was bound to provoke some kind of reaction, because Titus was a Gentile, which meant he was uncircumcised, he wasn't a Jew. And so he was a good test case for the issue that was being disputed. And so as Titus stood in front of these apostles in this meeting, this physical test case, it was a question of, will they welcome Titus as a brother in Jesus Christ? Or will they say to Titus, Titus, you're a Gentile, you need to be circumcised before we accept you as a proper Christian? And it was crucial, because it was about what it means to be a Christian. It wasn't a matter that they could agree to differ on. And so Titus wasn't compelled to be circumcised, because Titus was a true believer in Jesus, because he had faith in Jesus. And so he didn't need to do anything else. And so Titus was living proof, an example, that it is faith in Jesus alone that makes someone a Christian. He didn't need to follow all kinds of rules and regulations.

He needed faith in Jesus, and that's what he had. And so the Jerusalem apostles accepted, and they endorsed Paul and his message. And it's what gives freedom. So freedom, think about that word. We go on, 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. We did not give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. While speaking about false believers, they were false, they were false because they were pretending they were Christians, but they weren't, because they were saying you need to do more than just have faith in Jesus Christ. They were teaching that you needed to submit to all these Jewish laws, as we were saying. But by adding all these extra requirements for acceptance by God, Paul's saying this is like a return to

slavery. So you Galatians, you're free in Christ, by then doing all this stuff is like going back into a prison cell again that you've been set free from. And that's why Paul takes this zero tolerance approach. The false teachers were dangerous because their message was deluding people. Because we're not accepted by God through observing the law, we're accepted by God through Jesus' observance of the law. He's fulfilled it all for us so we don't need to. In fact, we're liable to the curse of the law because we can't keep it.

None of us can keep or do all that God tells us to do. That's how we can't get to God by trying to keep it because we'll always fall short. We only get to God because Jesus has kept it for us. And so if you add anything to faith in Jesus to make you acceptable to God, Paul's saying you lose your freedom and you become a slave. And the Galatians, they were free from all those aspects of the law like circumcision because those aspects of the law were only given to Israel anyway to make them different from other nations. But you might be thinking, well, if it's faith in Jesus and it isn't faith in Jesus plus observing the law, does that mean we're free to do whatever we want when we're a Christian? Are we free to sin? Can we ignore the Ten Commandments? If you were here over the summer, you'll know that we looked at each one of the Ten Commandments. And so you might be thinking, well, what was the point in that? If we can't keep them anyway, why think about the Ten Commandments?

[12:40] Because we might say, well, if it's faith in Jesus, it doesn't matter if I commit murder, adultery, steal, lie, and so on. And so is Paul saying that we don't have to obey God's moral law at all? Well, that's not what he's saying. He's saying that we're set free from obeying the law as the way of salvation.

In other words, obeying the Ten Commandments can't save us, but we're still called to obey, not in the hope of earning our salvation, but because we already have salvation in Jesus Christ. So we obey not to be accepted, but because we already are accepted in Jesus. Now, circumcision, it's not a big issue today, let's be honest. It's not something that comes up in conversation ever. But the issue today that flows from this is, how can somebody be accepted by God? For the Galatians, it was, well, if you're circumcised, you're accepted. But for us, how can you, how can I be accepted by God? Is it the kind of life that we've lived? Is it the things we've done? Is it our church attendance? Is it the fact that we were baptized as a baby? What is it that makes us acceptable to God? Well, we can't add anything to the finished work of Jesus Christ. It's his death and his resurrection that saves us, which means that we can't save ourselves by the things that we do. One commentator on this passage says, if we try to add anything to that free and gracious gospel, it would be like taking an Olympic gold medal and having it bronzed. I don't know about you, I loved watching the Tokyo Olympics, but I never saw anyone who won a gold medal then go and spray it bronze. But that's what happens when people think that we can get right with God by what we do instead of what Jesus has done.

We fail to see the beauty of the salvation that God freely gives us in Jesus, which is the gold medal, if you like. We fail to see that if we then try and add to it by the things that we do, circumcision for the Galatians or other things for us. Because there's always a temptation to add to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, whether it be some kind of tradition or practice or rule or ritual.

Churches can make up things that almost become like laws that must be obeyed if you are to be a proper Christian. And normally the things they add are generally good things. In other words, this particular distinctive that we practice in our church, if you do it, then God will love you more.

You're more acceptable to God. You're a proper Christian. So it might be faith in Jesus plus a certain aspect of Christian theology, faith in Jesus plus a certain experience of the Holy Spirit, faith in Jesus plus a certain kind of church or denomination, faith in Jesus plus a kind of church worship or a kind of dress or a stance on alcohol or a way of practicing the Christian life or a code of conduct for how you live your life out in the world. All these things can be bolted on to faith in Jesus as conditions for being a real Christian. And yet what Paul is saying here in Galatians is that if you add anything to faith in Jesus, it means you lose this gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, and you're spoiling it by adding things. It takes away your freedom and makes you a slave. Because if our salvation depends on what we do, then we're always going to be filled with fear, filled with guilt, filled with insecurity when we fail and when we struggle and when we don't do what we know we should do. We might think our salvation is hanging in the balance.

And yet it comes to us by grace through faith in Christ. And that's why Paul had to fight to preserve this gospel. And if we are to find true freedom in Jesus and help others find true freedom too, then

we'll need to preserve this gospel. It needs to be kept and it needs to be proclaimed.

[17 : 27] I love the advertising of the watchmaker Patek Philippe. You may be seeing it, Patek Philippe. There's always a picture of a dad and he's doing something with his boy. It's always like on a yacht maybe or playing polo, some kind of really rich person's sport or activity. And the dad's got this big, shiny Patek Philippe watch. And the slogan on the poster says, you never actually own a Patek Philippe.

You merely look after it for the next generation. And the idea is that the watch is so good that you'll die before the watch dies. That you will be able to pass this watch on to succeeding generations to your children, saying the Patek Philippe watch will last longer than you do. And it's clever advertising because it communicates the timeless beauty, the timeless quality of the brand, indicating that it is superior to all other brands of watches. And it is like that with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It needs to be preserved because it's timeless. It's the best. It's the way that we get to God. Anything else is a poor imitation and will fail and won't work. And so that's why Paul here was fighting for the truth of the gospel so that it might be preserved for the Galatians. And in preserving it for the Galatians, it is of course preserved for you and for me today. Because if we don't preserve the true gospel of Jesus Christ, this good news, then there is no good news to share. There is no hope for our world and there's no hope for you or me because we'll never get to God by anything that we do.

Only by what God does for us in Jesus and through our faith in him. So that's the first thing, the good news of Jesus gives true freedom. The second is the good news of Jesus establishes true unity.

So this meeting in Jerusalem was a triumph for the truth of the gospel because they united together around it. Verse 6 says, as for those who were held in high esteem, whatever they were makes no difference to me. God does not show favoritism. They added nothing to my message. That's a crucial statement in Galatians. They added nothing to my message. So Paul's saying, no addition, like circumcision, no other requirement is necessary in becoming a Christian. The Jerusalem apostles endorsed Paul's message that it's faith in Jesus alone that is necessary for salvation.

[20 : 11] Not faith in Christ plus, but faith in Christ full stop. And so he goes on, on the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter had been to the circumcised. For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. So Paul had been given this task by God to go to the Gentiles, the uncircumcised, and he's saying, Peter, I've been entrusted with the task of going to the Jews, the circumcised. But both were genuine apostles because both were called by God, both had the same message, the one gospel message, but both just went to different people.

And so Paul and the apostles were publicly united together. That's why it says, verse 9, James, Cephas, and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas their right hand of fellowship. When they recognized the grace given to me, they agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. So they recognized the grace given to Paul. They recognized Paul's message was the one message that the church had to proclaim, and so they united around it. The basis of their unity was this message, the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were saying, we're in full agreement, so let's get on with the task. And part of that task, verse 10 tells us, is remembering the poor. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

Okay, so this fellowship, this partnership, this unity was established with the gospel. And it is what kept these apostles, the early church, united. It was the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And out from this unity flowed this generosity in giving to the poor. The fact that the church gave between Jews and Gentiles was a sign that they were united around the one message of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 29] And so the fact that God sent Paul to Jerusalem to establish this unity of the apostles around the gospel of Jesus Christ shows us how vital it is to be united around the gospel.

Because Paul and the apostles could not tolerate the message of the false teachers. Because true unity can never be established at the expense of the gospel.

And that's worth saying because I think there's a lot of confusion around today about what it really means to be united within the church. What does unity look like?

What does unity actually mean? And people wonder why our church is so divided? Why is Christianity so different in so many places? Well, what does unity look like? Well, it looks like this. It looks like the gospel of Jesus Christ that we find in Galatians and throughout the rest of the Bible. Unity looks like believing and holding on to this one message, this gospel. That's the basis of unity in the church.

[23 : 40] The one true gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the one that Paul preached and proclaimed. It's the one that he was going to be preserved for the Galatians. And so that's why there can't be unity if people differ on what is at the heart of Christianity. In other words, you can't be united in the Christian church if you differ on the core. It's the core. It's the heart of the gospel. It's faith in Jesus alone that unites people together, nothing else. So anything that's added or subtracted from the message that we find in our Bibles isn't the true gospel. It isn't Christianity. It isn't a message that saves. It's false, just like the false teaching in Galatians. And so because it's false, it can't be tolerated today any more than it was tolerated by Paul. Because if it doesn't put people right with God, if it deludes people and confuses people, it should be rejected. So Paul had to fight to preserve the truth of the gospel. And it's also what the church must continue to do today because the gospel of Jesus Christ is always under attack. And it's always under attack, not just from those who are outside the church, but it is under attack from those within the church as well. Just like Paul says in chapter 2 verse 4, these false teachers had managed to infiltrate the early church with a different message. And so in churches today, churches may think that they're united, but if they're teaching different messages, if some churches are teaching a message that isn't the gospel we find in Galatians and in our Bibles, then they've distanced themselves, they've divided themselves from true Christianity and become false teachers because they're peddling a different gospel that is no hope for anyone.

And I guess some people will still say, but can't we just agree to differ? Can't we just say that there's just one big massive umbrella and all the different kinds of flavors and perspectives and opinions on Christianity, can't we just all be united even if we differ? Paul's saying no. Can't be united if you say that you can get to God by the things you do. You can't be united to true gospel Christianity if you don't trust and believe what the Bible teaches. I guess it always looks as if unity is something worth fighting for, but it should never be at the expense of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul very clearly here says, have no tolerance for those who have a different message because it isn't the gospel and you can't be united to them. And so he's saying that there's a necessity of preserving the truth of the gospel because it's the only thing that can put us right with God.

And if churches aren't teaching the gospel, then people will never hear the life-saving message of Jesus because there's nothing else other than this good news that can bring forgiveness for our sin, freedom, and fullness of life. Can you imagine what would have happened if the apostles had failed to unite around the truth of the gospel? Well, the Gentile believers would have been imprisoned in a Jewish culture, forced to submit to some kind of restrictive Jewish sect rather than enjoy freedom in Christ. But Christianity is about true freedom. It isn't about enslaving people to a Jewish way of life, of saying that you can earn your salvation by the things that you do, by your religious observance.

[27 : 50] Christianity is about good news of freedom for the world. And while Christianity is about preserving the truth, we should never think that Christianity is about preserving church traditions. While the message and the mission are always going to be the same, the methods will be different according to the context. And that's why we should never be so suspicious of people who do things differently than the things that we might do. Because not all churches need to be the same.

Because when we're united around the truth of the gospel, then we can be flexible on everything else. We can have different styles of worship services, different approaches to mission, and we'll need to if we're going to reach the many different people in our world with the one message of salvation in Jesus Christ. And that's why the Christian message can be translated into any cultural context. If you look at a map of the world and where all the people of the major religions live, you'll see that Christianity is the most diverse and the most spread out. And the reason is, it is not tied to a particular culture or people group or language, but it is above culture, and it goes into and can be translated into every culture. And that's why the Galatians didn't need to follow Jewish cultural practices to be real Christians, and why cultural differences or differences in style shouldn't really matter in churches today. And so we should never exclude anyone whom God in his grace is welcomed into his family. And Paul goes on to say that in chapter three. He says, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ

Jesus. Because when we are united around Jesus Christ and this message, the one true gospel, then the church displays the most beautiful diversity that the world could ever see.

And so the good news of Jesus is that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And it's only this good news that can give true freedom. And that's why it's worth fighting for, for the sake of our own lives, for the sake of our church, and for the sake of our world.