

## Unlocking Freedom: The Why is Everything

Galatians 5:1;5-12

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Andre Agassi was one of the greatest tennis players in the world. He won eight Grand Slams; became world number one; made millions of dollars and lived the life most people would call wildly successful.

But later, in his autobiography, Agassi admitted something shocking: he hated tennis. The thing he was best at, the thing that made him famous, had become a kind of prison. From the outside, his life looked disciplined and impressive. But inside, he was miserable.<sup>1</sup>

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We are returning today to our series in Galatians. And Galatians is a letter Paul wrote to some churches he had planted in what is modern day Turkey. And Paul had given these churches a basic understanding of Christianity. Essentially, he told them that if you trust in Jesus then God will save you. And when you are saved, you will begin living into the abundant life God has for you.

But then a group called the Judaizers came in and said, “No, that’s not quite right. It’s good that you believe in Jesus, but belief by itself isn’t enough. You need to obey as well. And only then will you be saved.

Now at first the difference might seem small: like it’s “be saved by believing in Jesus and then start living a good life”, versus, “believe in Jesus and be good in order to be saved.” But this difference wasn’t small to Paul, it was a complete distortion of the truth.

And in today’s passage he’s super mad at these Judaizers for leading the Galatians astray. And I tell you all this to prepare you for what we are about to read. So if you’ve got a Bible open it up to Galatians 5. We are going to start in verse 1 and then skip to verse 5 and read on from there. Would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Galatians 5:1;5-12]

Believe it or not this is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

At its heart what Paul is dealing with here is the human condition. Everyone wants to live the good life. And people have all sorts of different strategies for attain it. But in this passage Paul shows us that all the worlds’ answers are bankrupt and what humanity actually needs to arrive at the good life is an encounter with the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Agassi, Andre. *Open: An Autobiography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

So what I want to do today is look at first the bankrupt answers of the world and then at what the gospel is and how it works.<sup>2</sup>

First, the bankrupt answer from the world. In verse 1 Paul says:

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. (Galatians 5:1)

Now the key word in this verse is “again”. See Paul’s talking to a bunch of Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus out of paganism. And then a bunch of people called Judaizers came and tried to get them to start following the Mosaic law as well. So yes, they needed Jesus, but they also needed circumcision and rule-keeping. Only then would God accept them.

But Paul looks at that and says, “If you do this, you will **again** be burdened with a yoke of slavery.” In other words you will be right back where you started.

Now this is an incredible statement because on the surface, those two ways of life looked completely different. The life the Galatians had come out of was a life of pursuing freedom through desire. Paganism said, “Find the good life by going after what you want. If you want money, pursue money. If you want pleasure, pursue pleasure. If you want power, pursue power. Because getting what you want is how to find the abundant life everyone is looking for.

Now that probably sounds familiar right? It turns out the contemporary Canadian idea that life is found when you are true to yourself isn’t quite as modern as we might think. People have been doing this forever.

And when Paul initially found the Galatians they were living this way, but he had convinced them that what looked like freedom was actually slavery. And he got this from Jesus who says things like:

“Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. (John 8:34)

And actually we all know how this works. So maybe it starts as just scrolling through your phone and seeing things you shouldn’t, but eventually you find yourself enslaved to porn. Or maybe you are house hunting but as you are looking slowly your heart is taken over by envy and comparison. Or maybe it starts as a drink, or a pill, or a habit you can control, but eventually you need it just to cope with life. Sin always advertises freedom but delivers slavery in the end. And the Galatians were convinced and came to Christ.

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But then the Judaizers came in with what looked like a continuation of what Paul was preaching. They were saying, “Control your desires. Obey the law. Live a disciplined moral life. Of course believe in Jesus, but if you want God to accept you then make sure you are being good.”

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<sup>2</sup> Content and outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-freedom-of-love/> and <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-freedom-of-hope/> (Accessed May 20, 2026)

And this looked like the opposite of paganism. At first, they had been doing whatever they wanted, now they were doing everything God commanded. At first, they had been throwing off restraints, and now they were piling them on. At first, they were enjoying a bit of rebellion, and now they were being religious.

But look what Paul says. He says, “Do not let yourselves be burdened **again** by a yoke of slavery.” In other words these aren’t opposition positions at all, in fact they are just different places on the same continuum. And both paganism and religion result in slavery.

Now why? It’s because both are built on the same assumption: And that is that there is something basically good in us, and if we just arrange our lives properly, we can get ourselves to the good life. Now the first path says, “the real you is good, so set it free.” And the second path says, “The real you is good enough, so discipline it into shape.” But really they are the same thing – people are essentially good. But while this sounds great, lived experience tells a different story.

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So there’s a famous novel many students used to encounter in school called “Lord of the Flies.” It was written just after World War 2 and it’s a story about a group of British boys who get stranded on an island without adults. And at first it looks like a chance to build a decent society without all the corruption of old people – teenage angst anyone?

And so they choose a leader and make some rules and talk about keeping a signal fire burning so they can be rescued. But then fear, pride and the hunger for power start taking over and their civilization begins to collapse.

All of a sudden, boys who seemed innocent become cruel. Play turns into violence. Leadership becomes domination. And so after only a short while on the island they are hunting and murdering each other.

See the problem humanity faces is not that we are restricted by bad rules or are failing to follow good ones. If we just needed fewer rules, then self-expression would save us. And if we just needed better rules, then religion would save us. But the problem is deeper than that. The problem is that our hearts are broken. So Jeremiah says:

The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. (Jeremiah 17:9)

And this is what Paul is getting at. The Galatians had been enslaved once by chasing their desires. Now they were being enslaved again by trusting in their obedience. But Paul says, “Christ didn’t come so you could trade one slavery for another, you need freedom.” And this is what the gospel creates.

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So what is the gospel? Well we get the heart of the gospel in verse 6. Paul says:  
For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is **faith** expressing itself through **love**. (Galatians 5:6)

So not circumcision or uncircumcision. In other words, neither the rule-keeping of the Judaizers nor the self-expression of paganism can give us the life we are looking for. One says, “follow your desires and you will be free.” The other says, “control your desires and God will accept you.” But Paul says neither one can change the human heart. Instead the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. And this is the heart of the gospel.

See God has never been primarily interested in changing us into good people. He’s not trying to change drunken partiers into tie-wearing Sunday school teachers. That’s not what He wants. He wants to transform us into new creations.

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C.S. Lewis captures this beautifully in Mere Christianity. He says:

God became man “to turn creatures into sons”—not simply to make better people of the old kind, but to create a new kind of person altogether. It is not like teaching a horse to jump higher and higher; it is like turning a horse into a winged creature.

And this is what Paul means by “faith expressing itself through love.” The gospel doesn’t pressure the old self into better behaviour. It creates a new kind of self.

Now Paul isn’t saying obedience doesn’t matter. He is not saying “if drunken partying is your thing go for it.” No. Look at verse 7:

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? (Galatians 5:7)

So obeying the truth is deeply important for Paul. This means the difference between Paul and the Judaizers wasn’t that the Judaizers cared about holiness and Paul didn’t. No. Paul deeply cared about holiness. But the difference was that the Judaizers made obedience the basis for acceptance, while Paul says obedience is the result of acceptance.

And that’s the issue. See the gospel does not say, “Obey so God will love you.” The gospel says, “God loves you in Christ, and when you accept this that love begins to change the way you live.” And these are completely opposite things.

See obedience done to earn salvation may look righteous on the outside, but underneath it is still unbelief. It is still the heart saying, “I do not really trust grace. I need to prove myself. I need to make myself acceptable. I need to give God a reason not to reject me.” And that kind of obedience is just as enslaving as disobedience.

Like imagine some kids were saying mean things to each other – not my kids because they’re perfect, but probably some of your kids. So what do you do? Well, when Nikki was little her parents used to make her and her brother hug and say “I’m sorry.”

And that sounds great. But what happens when you do this? You get this sarcastic apology and loveless hug – “I’m sorry.” They say the right words, but their hearts haven’t changed at all.

And that’s religion. Religion can make you say sorry. Religion can make you hug. But the gospel makes you want to love.

So how does that happen? Well, look at verse 11. Paul says:

Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. (Galatians 5:11)

Paul says he’s not preaching religion, he’s preaching about the offence of the cross. And it’s the offence that makes the gospel powerful.

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Now think about this for a second. On the surface, the Judaizer’s message sounds really affirming. They say, “Believe in Jesus and be good. Try hard. Obey the rules. Live the right way. Then God will accept you – you can do it!”

And most people aren’t offended by that because they already believe some version of it. “Of course I need to be a good person and try my best. And if I leave the world a better place than I found it surly God will be pleased and let me in.”

And this sounds affirming because at our core one of the things we all want to believe about ourselves is that generally we’re not that bad. And so if we just get a little help then we can climb our way up to God.

In contrast the gospel sounds totally offensive because it says, “No. You are way more sinful than you want to admit. Your heart is more broken than you realize. Your desires are more disordered than you think. You’re so broken that even the good things you do have selfish roots. The reason you help the old lady across the street – no offence to old ladies – is to impress your young girlfriend. You don’t need improvement. You need rescue.”

And the proof of this is the cross. See the cross says your heart is so sinful that nothing less than the death of the Son of God could save you. But we all want to say, “Wait! I know I’m not perfect, but I’m not that bad. Sure, I’ve made some mistakes, but I can change.”

But the cross says, “No way. If you could have fixed yourself Jesus wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of dying in your place. When Jesus was in the Garden sweating blood and praying “If there is any other way please take this cup from Me.” God would have said, “Oh sure, Dan can just try a bit harder and he’ll be fine.” But the Father didn’t say that because with sinners like you and me there was no other way. You can’t fix yourself. You can’t save yourself. Your only hope is the death of God on your behalf. And that’s the offence of the cross.

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But here's the surprise. The thing that sounds offensive on the surface is actually the most loving message in the world. See if salvation is based on your obedience, then underneath the religious message is fear. "Obey God, or He will reject you. Perform well enough, or you're out."

But the gospel says something completely different. The gospel says, "In Christ, God has loved you and received you. In Christ, God has redeemed you for Himself with His own blood. And because you belong to Him, He's never going to leave you or forsake you."

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Now think of the different way this motivates. So the fear of rejection might restrain behaviour – be good or you're gonna get it. But when you encounter the love of God it has the power to transform your desire. And this is what Paul describes in verse 5. He says:

For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. (Galatians 5:5)

See when God's Holy Spirit gets into us His love sparks faith and we start eagerly awaiting the righteousness we hope for.

Now there is a future aspect to this. One day, when Jesus returns, everyone who belongs to Him will be made fully righteous. We will be completely healed. Our sin will be gone. Our desires will no longer be divided. We will love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength.

But this isn't just a "when Jesus comes back" thing, there is an "already" aspect to righteousness as well. See when Jesus' Spirit gets into us, He gets to work right away. And this means we start desiring righteousness right now. And this is the power of the gospel.

See everyone is working to get what they think is going to make them happy. This is true for the drug addict and the workaholic and the mom who is living for her kids. Whatever we think is going to make us happy is the thing we pursue with everything we've got.

But when Jesus gets into us He starts changing our desires so we start wanting what He knows will actually bring us abundant life. And Paul gets at this with the word "eagerly." Eagerly isn't an action word, it's a motivation word. It's not about doing the right thing, it's about excitedly wanting the right thing. And this is the miracle the gospel accomplishes that nothing else can.

Self expression says "the real you is good, so set it free." Religion says "the real you is good enough, so discipline it into shape." But the gospel gets into our heart.

The gospel says you're so sinful God had no other option but to die in your place, but you're so loved that it was His joy to do it. And when that captures your heart it can actually change what you want to do.

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One of my favorite stories is about Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. Valjean spends nineteen years in prison for stealing bread, and when he finally gets out, fear has not made him better—it has made him harder. The law has crushed him and taught him to survive by suspicion and resentment.

And so on his way home he steals silver from a bishop who had shown him kindness.

Well he gets caught, but when the police drag him back, Valjean thinks he's finished – he's going back to prison. But instead of condemning him, the bishop says, "You forgot the candlesticks," and he gives him even more silver.

And that moment of undeserved mercy breaks Valjean open. Fear of punishment had never changed him. Threats had never made him righteous. But love—grace he did not deserve—transforms him. And from that point on, he becomes a man of compassion and courage.

And this is the gospel: God does not say, "Obey Me so I will love you." He says, "In Christ, I have loved you and made you My own." And when that love finally lands in your heart, obedience stops being the terrified work of a slave and becomes the joyful response of a son or daughter. And this is the abundant life we are all hungry for.

So let me ask you: what's driving your obedience? Is it fear? Are you trying to obey because deep down you are scared that if you fail, God will finally be done with you? Or perhaps it's pride. You're trying to obey because being good makes you better than the person beside you?

Or is it love? Have you seen Jesus clearly enough that His love has begun to change what you want? That's the question at the heart of this passage. And this is why the "why" to everything you do matters.

See Agassi could swing a racket with excellence while hating the very thing he was doing. And you can obey God in a way that looks disciplined while your heart is driven by fear or obligation. So excellence and discipline can be slavery.

But if you've encountered the gospel, then something has happened in you and you're becoming a new creation. You're a son or a daughter loving to delight your heavenly father; you're a winged horse.

So do you know about Jesus? Or do you know Him?