



“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (Galatians 5:1–15).

Are you free? Is your Christianity liberating? Have you forgotten that freedom is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian? There are three things about true freedom: what it's from, what it's for, and what it takes.

Freedom: What It's From

The place you always begin when talking about freedom is with the preposition “from.” We want to be freed from something. We want freedom from the shackles, from the fear, from that force that's oppressing us.

Our culture is fixated on freedom. Americans are all about freedom. Freedom might be the highest value in our society. Look at our history: There's the Declaration of Independence (from British rule). One of America's most memorable speeches was from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 “I Have a Dream” freedom speech. The last three lines say: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!”

Freedom language has shaped our history. Teenagers want to be free. The movies and stories we like are freedom stories like *Braveheart*.

Our culture thinks Christianity has nothing to add to these stories, nothing to say about freedom. Christianity has much more to offer regarding freedom than secular American culture. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous lines about freedom come from an old Negro Spiritual, a worship song, a song about God.

The Bay Area defines freedom as freedom from all constraints—freedom is being free from all boundaries, freedom to do whatever you want. Just look at our parades! We'll call this secular-do-whatever-you-want freedom. The problem is, this is a narrow and naïve definition of freedom. The human heart is full of contradictory desires. Being in shape vs. that extra cheese pizza. You're free, which do you choose? D.I.N.K. (double income no kids) vs. having children. You're free, but you want both. That's not freedom.

The 60s Bay Area people chased “Free Love,” complete sexual freedom, secular-do-whatever-you-want freedom, but that freedom brought disease, death, disillusionment, broken hearts, broken homes. With secular freedom you're never free because there's no guidance to your wants.

Christianity is realistic about the human heart and it offers us a freedom where we're not enslaved to these constantly competing desires. The Bible is a story of freedom vs. slavery.

Before someone ever becomes a Christian, they start to wake up and realize that they're enslaved, that they're in bondage to something and need to be set free. Every one of us is yoked to something. We've all put on our backs some sort of yoke that controls us.

A yoke is incredible, long-standing technology. It's a wooden frame used to control the course and direction of working animals. Throughout the Bible a “yoke” was a set of teaching that controls the course and direction of a person's life. The yoke you choose, the yoke you live by, is either going to crush you or free you.

Look at what Paul says in verse 1, “*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” Who were the Galatians? Pagans! He's telling them, “do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

There are two different yokes, two different ways of life, that can enslave a person. The Galatians' old yoke of slavery was paganism—insecure life alienated from God. The Galatians' new yoke of slavery was religion/legalism—an insecure life where you're constantly unsure of God's love. Most people are living under one of these two yokes of slavery.

Christianity offers the world freedom from both the pagan yoke and the religious yoke. What were you yoked to? Which of these two yokes did Jesus Christ free you from when you first believed? Which of these two yokes have you maybe re-fastened around your neck and it's crushing you? Only Jesus can pry that yoke off of you with his favorite tool, the long beam of the cross. Only Jesus can set you free.

Christianity frees you from the yoke of paganism—from living life alienated from God, from living under the anarchy of secular-do-whatever-you-want freedom which only ends up enslaving you because it ignores the design God has stamped upon your heart. God made you for himself and your heart will never be free until you have him and he has you.

And Christianity frees you from the yoke of religion—from never being sure of God, from always striving and doing (circumcision) in hopes of earning God's attention and favor. This is freedom from the yoke of the orphanage: from living like an insecure orphan rather than as a son or daughter assured of the Father's love.

The problem with these other yokes is they can never fulfill you and they can never forgive you, they only enslave you. Christ is the only master who when you get him, he fulfills you. And when you fail him, he forgives you.

Charles Wesley was a man freed from the yoke of religion. He was a pastor and is largely credited, along with his brother John, with founding the Methodist movement. He was also the writer of many famous hymns. He was converted (Freed!) in 1738, at 31 years old, already having been a pastor and missionary.

Journalist Dorothy Thompson wrote: "Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live." Wesley saw his conversion as when he began to live, when he quit being afraid of not being good enough for God, being set free.

He wrote a conversion hymn entitled *Free Grace*.

And can it be, that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me?—who caused His pain!
For me?—who Him to death pursued.
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

He left his Father's throne above
(So free, so infinite His grace!)

Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free!
For, O my God! It found out me!"

Free Grace! It freed Wesley from the yoke of religion. It's freed many of us from the yoke of religion and the yoke of paganism. But what have we been freed for?

Freedom: What It's For

It's so false to think Christianity has nothing to say about freedom. Jesus' first sermon was all about freedom. Quoting from Isaiah: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives...to set at liberty those who are oppressed.*"

The reason Jesus was sent to earth was to set people free. The freedom Christianity offers is freedom to live a new life. Freedom to live the life God designed you to live. Freedom for a new yoke.

Cicero once wrote that to be completely free one must become a slave to a set of laws. In 1890 hymn writer George Matheson said the same thing with the first line of his hymn: "Make me a captive Lord, and then I shall be free." It's a paradox. There's no such thing as yoke-less freedom. We're all living under a yoke. The pagan yoke and the religion yoke will enslave you, but there's one yoke that sets you free.

Jesus said: "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" The translation is: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

We're never going to be free until we start doing what we were born to do. What were you born to do? When Jesus sets us free, when we get to know him, when we take on his yoke, what we most want to do begins to fall in line with the deep realities of the universe, with how God has designed us. Before we met Jesus we were fish out of water—something was off, we never felt free. But when we meet Jesus, when we put on his yoke, we find the water.

Christianity frees us **from** the yoke of slavery and frees us for a yoke that God designed our shoulders to carry. "*For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'*" (verses 13–14).

Does your concept of freedom have love at the center? If your concept of freedom doesn't have love at the center, chuck it. Real freedom expresses itself in love. We never knew this before, we could never do this before, because we were too insecure and selfish. The two yokes of slavery, paganism and religion, leave you too insecure and too selfish to really love, to do verse 14: ***"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."***

The worst kind of slavery is slavery to self, slavery to your endless insecurities and selfishness that prevents you from joining the party and swimming in the water God meant for you to enjoy. John Stott said the truest freedom is "freedom from my silly little self, in order to live responsibly in love for God and others."

God's will for your life is clear. Are you confused about God's will for your life? God's will is love God, trust God, and love your neighbor.

True freedom isn't freedom from all constraints, it's freedom to live by the will of a God who knows you (Ps. 139: he knitted you together in your mother's womb) and to live by the yoke of a Savior who described his whole mission towards you as a freedom mission. Only Christianity offers this deep freedom. Only Christianity tells you that you are so deeply loved that you can finally forget about yourself, trust God, and freely love other people.

This is the freedom the Galatians were in danger of forgetting and it was damaging their church. This is the freedom that at the age of 31 transformed Charles Wesley. A biographer reflecting on Wesley's conversion and conversion hymn wrote: "The bondage to sin and the darkness of doubt were broken and driven away when Christ came into the poet's life. Charles Wesley used images of...liberation to communicate the freedom that he now felt because of his faith in Christ. Newfound freedom leads directly to Christian discipleship, as the singer now follows Christ."

The first few verses marvel over grace. The fourth verse shows that this is freedom for taking on a new yoke, following Jesus:

Long my imprison'd spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and follow'd Thee.

When the dungeon fills with light...everything changes. "My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and follow'd Thee." ***"I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free"*** (Psalm 119:32).

Freedom: What It Takes

Freedom isn't free. Freedom is costly. Political freedom in America cost the blood and sacrifice of countless soldiers in many wars. This freedom Wesley sings about cost God dearly. God's Son

took on the splintery yoke of the cross so we could take on the soft yoke of freedom.

Freedom is not easily gained, and once gained it can be easily lost. The Galatians had this costly freedom from a yoke of slavery, this freedom for a new life of knowing God and loving others, but they were in danger of losing it. They forgot what freedom takes. ***"You were running well. Who hindered you (cut in on you) from obeying the truth"*** (v.7). The imagery here is of a race, a distance race or marathon. In the ancient Greek games, oftentimes at the turnaround point a runner would cut in on or trip up another runner, causing him to lose the race. The Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. The longer the race the more can go wrong, the more your freedom can be attacked. The Christian life is a marathon and people are going to try to cut in on you and steal your freedom.

Are you running well? Or does verse 7 describe you, "You **were** running well"? Here's what it takes to take hold of, or re-take hold of, the freedom God wants you to live in.

Discern the voices of persuasion in your life

There are so many different voices in your head and in your life. All day long you hear voices of persuasion. And it takes discipline to discern divine persuasion vs. demonic persuasion. ***"This persuasion is not from him who calls you"*** (v.8). The Galatians went astray through persuasion.

How did a yoke of slavery first enter the world? Through a voice of persuasion. A serpent in the grass (Satan) took eyes off of God's incredible provision and onto God's one prohibition or restraint on freedom. Everywhere you step there are serpents in the grass trying to persuade you to doubt God, trust yourself, and find freedom in disobedience. It's a trick! Don't listen to that voice.

Do you know what Satan's voice sounds like? It sounds just like it did in Genesis 3, it sounds like doubt: "Did God really say...that he loves you, that you can trust him completely, that freedom comes from loving him and loving others?"

Do you know what God's voice sounds like? It sounds like grace, it sounds like freedom: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Discern the competing voices of persuasion in your life. When the serpent speaks, close your ears and step on his head. When you hear the persuasive whispers of grace, listen, believe, obey. God's given you a whole Book of his voice written down so that you can hold fast to your freedom.

Forget your self and love other people recklessly

Forget your silly little self and love others with abandon. According to this passage, the main way we exercise our freedom

is by loving other people. The way that we prove our freedom is by our love for our neighbor.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

The Peninsula will catch a glimpse of true freedom when it sees a community of people who forget themselves and love others recklessly. Start with the people closest to you, that's where it's the hardest to do this.

Cast off your old yoke, leave it there on the ground, start over, put on Jesus' yoke of freedom and start running. It's for freedom that Christ set us free. Live Free, or Die. The yoke of paganism and the yoke of religion lead to slavery and death. It doesn't matter who you are. You can cast off your yoke. You can start all over. You can come to Jesus and finally be free.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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