

PERMISSION GRANTED

Galatians 5:1

Worship Moment Message

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SCRIPTURE

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1 NRSV).

MESSAGE

There was a prisoner on an island nation in the Pacific who was desperate to escape. One day he seized upon an opportunity when a delivery truck pulled into the prison warehouse. The prisoner scampered underneath the truck and held on to its underpinnings. The truck drove out of the prison and unbeknownst to the driver took with it the prisoner. The truck drove for a while and finally it came to a stop. The prisoner let go, rolled outward to freedom, or so he thought. Unfortunately for him, the truck had stopped in the courtyard of a neighboring prison.

This story is for me a parable about human life. We want to be free. There's something in the human soul that cries out to be free. But we want freedom on our own terms and we want to achieve it in our own way. Consequently, the only thing which changes is the type of prison.

The Scripture says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." This is God's word for us. It is a true statement. It is to be accepted, even welcomed. But few of us ever have any measure of appreciation for the freedom that Christ offers us.

Christian freedom is not the liberty to do whatever you want, whenever you want. Nor is it a humanly achievable independence. Rather, it is a permission given to us. And if a permission, then it comes from an authority – in this case, God. And if it is permission, then it is freedom with a purpose. Therefore, this word "permission" accurately conveys the notion of Christian freedom because it spells out the two conditions: It comes from God and it has a purpose. These two conditions, then, form a kind of natural boundary to a vast, vast continent of liberty.

I'm not going to stand up here and pretend that I'm an expert on experiencing Christian freedom. Quite the contrary, I often prefer my own cell. Now, when I say, "cell," I don't mean it literally. Sadly, there are many Christians around the world who are in actual prison cells for what they believe. This is a serious matter and we need to pray for their liberation.

But a lot of us find ourselves in spiritual prisons even after becoming a Christ-follower. We even seem to prefer it. There's something familiar and secure about my own prison cell. Oh, I know the door is unlocked. But I'm just a little afraid to go out. Lately, however, I've been getting kind of sick and tired of my prison cell and I'm starting to hunger to know, feel, and live the freedom that Christ has purchased for me.

I believe that many of you hunger for this same freedom. So I invite you to join with me in exploring this marvelous continent of Christian freedom. It will be a little bit scary. We may change. But if Christ purchased this freedom for us, then he must want us to have it, and that's good enough reason for me to explore it. Using as a map, of course, the Scriptures. The Bible is our map for this vast continent called liberty. We also need a compass to tell us where we are. The compass has four points. In like manner, let us consider four points, rooted in scripture, that will tell us where we are, where we stand.

The first point is that God made us as free persons. God made a beautiful world and placed our human parents in this beautiful world and told them that they had dominion over it, over everything. And they could enjoy it. And they could be free to eat of any fruit, but they were not to go to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They were not to eat of that fruit. So as long as they obeyed God, they were completely free.

However, they didn't stay free because they disobeyed God. They went to that tree we call the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and they ate. They wanted to be like God – inasmuch as God had been the source of truth and goodness they wanted to change that so that they, and not God, determined what was true and what was good. And in that disobedience they had their freedom destroyed and their relationships changed. Their relationship with God changed. Their relationship to their beautiful world changed. Their relationship to each other changed. We have inherited this change. We have inherited the influence of sin in the world. We are alienated from God and from each other. And we have very little freedom.

Most of the freedom we talk about now is an illusion. During the course of a day how many decisions are really free? We make decisions based on our addictions, based on our compulsions, based on the pressures we feel from family and society, and the influences we receive from the environment and from heredity. We have very little freedom left, and what freedom we do have we tend to use for the wrong purposes. Ever since the fall, ever since our human parents disobeyed God and sin entered the world, it has been a lot easier to choose the bad than it is to choose the good. Which is easier, to start a bad habit or to start a good habit? It's easy to start a bad habit, try breaking a bad habit. It's hard to start a good habit; it's even harder to keep at it. There's an inclination within us to use what little freedom we have for the wrong purposes.

Which leads to the second point: Sin has corrupted and perverted our freedom. Jesus says, "Whoever commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). We're slaves to sin; we're no longer free. Paul describes it in Romans. He says, "The good thing I want to do, I can't seem to do, and the evil I don't want to do I end up doing" (Rom 7: 19). We are slaves to sin.

The third point is good news: Through Christ we are set free. Through Christ and only through Christ, our freedom has been restored. Jesus says, "You will know the truth and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). In one of his first sermons, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, he says he had come to proclaim release to the captives and liberty to those who are oppressed (Lk 4:18). And later he says, "If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Through Christ we are set free from sin and death. Our friendship with God is restored.

The fourth point is freedom is not a human achievement but a gift from God. In the ancient Greco-Roman world if a slave wanted to be set free, a large sum of money had to be paid and there was a kind of religious ceremony. So the slave would hand over this large sum of money and then the priest would make sure that it got to the master of the slave. And then in a ceremony the priest would say that the slave was no longer the property of the human master, but was now the property of "god" – whatever god or goddess it was that the priest served. And then the priest would write out a certificate and give it to the slave. He'd write on the certificate the words: "For Freedom." Apparently that's what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "For Freedom, Christ has set us free."

Now ancient slaves very seldom had money. So unless there was an outside benefactor they did not usually get set free. So it is with us. We are slaves to sin, but have not the means to pay for our freedom. Christ has paid for our freedom. Therefore, we are no longer servants of sin, but servants of God. For freedom, Christ has set us free. And this freedom is not a human achievement; it's a gift from God, and so it has purposes that God gives to it. It's not a freedom to do whatever we want. It's a freedom to be able to obey God.

There are two kinds of freedom. There's a freedom – or what we think is freedom – to be able to do anything we want, anytime we want. But that freedom lasts only a few moments. The first decision you make ends your freedom, for thereafter you are a slave to your own whims and passions. On the other hand, the freedom to obey God lasts forever. It's eternal. And we need not be afraid of this idea of obeying God as though God was some sort of ogre who wants to destroy our fun. God wills our highest good. Therefore, to obey God is to enjoy the greatest good. It is God who created pleasure. The devil never created one single pleasure. He twists the meaning of it. He perverts it and

corrupts it. But it did not start with him. It is God who is the source of all true joy and pleasure, and therefore, this freedom which we have in Christ is freedom to enjoy the greatest possible good and pleasure from the Almighty.

These are the four points of the compass. God made us to be free persons. Sin has corrupted and perverted our freedom. Christ restores our freedom. Freedom is not a human achievement but a gift from God with a good purpose.

These four points help us to know where we are in this immense continent of liberty, and they're deeply rooted in scripture. So what are we going to do? Will we remain chained to an old life? Or will we venture forth in a new one as free people?

Christ has purchased freedom for you and me. Therefore, let us be about exploring all the good, all the great treasures of grace that God has to offer us. And so I bid you, join me in this journey. For freedom Christ has set us free.