

Series: Set Free to Live Free (Galatians)

#1. Freedom from religious performance

Galatians 1:1-9 Galatians 2:11-21

Series Introduction

Today we're beginning a 5-week sermon series on the book of Galatians that speaks right into our theme for the year of "Walking with God".

I don't know if this is your experience, but it's certainly mine – and, from what I've observed, the experience of many others - but our walk with God can get bogged down by all sorts of things. On the surface they seem good, holy, Christian, but there's something not quite right. Their purpose gets twisted. And instead of serving the Gospel, they end up taking the place of Jesus and the gospel.

That's exactly what was happening to the church in Galatia. The gospel was being replaced by all sorts of traditions and practices that ended up dragging the people down. In his letter to them, Paul takes them back to the heart of the Gospel. To the freedom that that Gospel brings.

Freedom. And who of us doesn't want freedom: freedom from pain, freedom from guilt, freedom from addictions, freedom from shame; freedom from anxiety and fears and grief.

Freedom is the key word of Galatians. Thus the theme we've given this series: "Set Free to Live Free!"

Message

Performance. Our culture rewards performance. Whether it's in our family life, the sporting arena, our education system, or in our work – if you perform above average you will be noticed, applauded, and rewarded.

It's not hard to take this same idea into our standing with God: "If I do good, God will be pleased with me. And if I do enough good that should make up for any of the bad things I might do. And if I consistently attend worship services, read the Bible, attend Bible Studies and pray - then that should get some bonus marks with God!"

Let me ask you: Whenever I am trying to impress God with my performance, who am I focussing on? ME! And if I'm relying on MY performance to get into God's good books, then I'm no longer trusting JESUS and HIS performance!

Paul addresses this issue in his letter to the Galatians. Previously, Paul had visited this region and shared the Good News of God's forgiveness and new life in Jesus. But then some false teachers came along, making other demands on these new Christians. Paul calls them "*the circumcision group*" 2:12. Commentators refer to them as "the Judaizers". Why? Because they were insisting that some of the Old Testament Jewish practices were still binding on the New Testament church. In effect, they were saying, "Hey, if you want to be proper Christians, you must eat kosher food - like the Jews. If you want to be proper Christians, then all your men must be circumcised - like the Jews. Otherwise you can't be part of God's holy people."

Not only did this bring much confusion to the Galatian Christians, but it also sent alarm bells ringing loudly in Paul's ears. So with the strongest language he can muster, Paul fires straight: "*I am 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. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! 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!*" 1:6-9 NIV

Do you get what Paul is so upset about here? It's this "*different gospel*" that the Judaizers were peddling. The Jesus PLUS gospel. "Believe in Jesus PLUS get circumcised", they said. "Believe in Jesus PLUS eat the right foods." "Believe in Jesus PLUS keep certain religious festivals."

What's the basic problem with this Jesus PLUS gospel? Once you start adding human actions to what Jesus has done, you end up relying on your performance to make you right with God. And once you're on a performance treadmill, you end up anxious and stressed, because there's no certainty that your relationship with God is everything it should be. Have I loved enough? Have I cared enough? Have I obeyed enough? Have I forgiven enough? Have I trusted enough?

That's the issue with the Jesus PLUS Gospel, isn't it. Just how much PLUS is required? How much do I have to do for it to be enough?

Can I tell you how much is required to be enough? It's 100%! Once you start relying on your own performance to get you right with God, you are obliged to keep ALL the commandments of God, perfectly, 100% of the time. That's what Paul writes later in Galatians: *"anyone who tries to live by his own effort, independent of God, is doomed to failure. Scripture backs this up: 'Utterly cursed is every person who fails to carry out every detail written in the Book of the law.' The obvious impossibility of carrying out such a moral program should make it plain that no one can sustain a relationship with God that way."* 3:10-11a Msg

It's no wonder that Paul calls this Jesus PLUS gospel *"no gospel at all."* Because there's no "good news" in that. There's no freedom. There's no rest for the soul. There's no security. There's no peace.

Paul had travelled that road. As a Pharisee, his PLUS was huge! His efforts at obeying the law and following the religious rituals and traditions was second to none. But it got him nowhere. Nowhere good, anyway.

But there is good news to be found! There is freedom and rest for the soul and security and peace to be found. Paul discovered it. By realising that it is not the PLUS ME that makes us right before God. It's the JESUS ONLY that does that. Listen to this key gospel verse in Scripture; a verse that transformed Paul and 1400 years later ignited the Reformation. It's Galatians 2:16 – reading from the Message translation:

"We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it—and we" - that is, the Jews – "and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good." (Galatians 2:16)

When Luther discovered this truth, he says that it was like the gates of paradise opened to him. At last he was set free from the treadmill of trying to please God by his own performance. Set free from guilt and condemnation. Set free to face death without fear. Set free to do life with God. And set free to share this same Good News of Jesus with the rest of the world.

That's the heart of the Good News! It's Jesus! Only Jesus! Jesus is the difference between religion and Christianity. And – as we saw last Sunday - the difference is as simple as the terms, "DO" and "DONE". All religions prescribe various ways of getting right with "god". DO these good things ...perform these rituals. By doing all these things you have a chance of making it into God's good books at the end of your life – or with many Eastern religions you will find the spark of your soul released into the divine.

The Good News of Christianity is that God has come down to us in the person of Jesus to bring us into a right relationship with himself – in time and for eternity. Jesus has DONE this through his perfect life, his atoning death on the cross for our sins, and his resurrection from the dead. It's all DONE. It ALL depends on Jesus, not on us!

The Bible – and especially the book of Galatians - uses the term "grace" to describe how God relates to us through Christ. Grace is God loving us, forgiving us, adopting us as his dear children - for Christ's sake - even though we didn't deserve it. Grace is God opening up the gates of heaven for us - even when we deserved that he shut us out forever. Faith simply receives Jesus and this right relationship with God as a gift. By trusting in Jesus and what he has DONE, we are set free from slavery to performance based religion. We are set free to live free.

Can I – just before we pray – can I ask you a question: where do you sit? Under the Jesus PLUS banner? Or under the Jesus ONLY banner? The Jesus PLUS banner can be pretty hard to pick, because it can be pretty subtle. It can be about things that are good and proper – things like behaviour and morals and correct doctrine and good order in the church, and rituals and traditions and things like that. But if we're flying any of those flags when we're talking to people about what it means to be a Christian – how we become a Christian – then we're under the wrong flag. Because those things are about ME. They're Jesus PLUS what I do things. They're about performance. And they lead to nowhere. And I'm not saying that they don't have a place in our lives. They do. All of them. But not when it comes to our salvation, our being put right with God. That's all Jesus doing. Only Jesus.

Prayer: Father God, we bless you and thank you for your amazing grace - that for the sake of your Son, Jesus, you forgive us and set us free from the bondage of trying to please you with our own performance. Today, we renounce all those things we do to try and make ourselves right with you. With St Paul, we regard them as rubbish compared to the right-relationship-with-you that comes by trusting Jesus and what he has done for us. Jesus, come into our hearts and direct our lives. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, so we can live in the Father's love with joyful obedience. Amen.