

# Defend Your Liberty

*Murray 2015*

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**Bible Text:** Galatians 5:1  
**Preached on:** Sunday, December 6, 2015

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Let's read again in Galatians 5:1,

1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,  
and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

If you took a tablespoon of potassium cyanide, it just looks like salt or sugar, it's a white powder, and you put it in a room with 43 people in it, 90% of them would be dead within two to six hours; that's 39 of the 43 would be dead within a few hours from just one little tablespoon of white powder. It looks so harmless; it looks just like lots of other harmless and even beneficial substances but potassium cyanide is one of the most fatal substances in the world. It's a killer. It's why the terrorists are after it so anxiously. But however poisonous, however toxic potassium cyanide is, there is something actually even more poisonous, something even more toxic, something even more deadly, and it's trying to mix anything with Christ for salvation. It's trying to add anything to Christ for salvation. As has often been said from this pulpit, Christ is everything or he is nothing. Christ is everything or he is nothing and this epistle was written because of the danger of a poison of a toxic that was seeping into the Galatian church, a deadly mixing of something else with Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

In this letter, it begins, the first two chapters are really Gospel experience. It gives us a spiritual biography of the Apostle Paul where he shows that if Christ is not everything, he's nothing. Then chapters 3 to 4 are really Gospel theology where he explains why that is so that Christ is everything or Christ is nothing. And then in the last two chapters, chapters 5 and 6, it's really the Gospel applied. The Gospel he lived and then the Gospel he explained and then he's saying, "And here's the Gospel applied to various areas of personal life and church life." And he begins it with this wonderful exhortation, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

The first thing this verse really calls us to is to seek liberty; to pursue freedom. You can't stand fast in something until you've got it and so here, at least by implication if not explicitly, we are called each one of us here through this verse to seek freedom for ourselves; to pursue it personally for our own enjoyment and the illustration really is of

slavery. In these days, the slave owner viewed his slave as a piece of property. He could do whatever he wanted with that slave. He could decide whether to keep him or sell him on. He could decide whether he was to be married or not married; whether he was to have children or not; or if he had them, whether he could keep them. He decided how long he worked for. He decided if he paid anything at all to him for his wages. He decided where he would live; how he would spend his leisure time; where he would sleep. He treated him really just like you and I would treat any piece of personal property. We wouldn't consult our cars or our silverware or our crockery as to what they wanted to be and do. We just use them, don't we? We're in charge. We are the owners. We decide and that's the kind of slavery that was in view here and that's why it was such a sadly perfect illustration of spiritual slavery and the kind of slavery that Paul was concerned that the Galatians would be freed from. He was looking at them and he was saying, "I want you to be freed. I want you to be liberated. I want you to enjoy emancipation."

But what kind of slavery in particular does he have in view? As we look at the New Testament in particular there are four kinds of spiritual slavery that the apostle and the Lord speak about. There is, first of all, the slavery of sin. Sin is portrayed as a slave master. It owns us. It controls us. It decides what we will do or not do. It dictates our life. We often don't realize that sometimes the enslavement is very benign, almost unnoticeable, and yet we are born under the sway of sin, the sin from within our own hearts, the sin that you might see as around us in the world, and the sin, of course, that the great slave master, Satan himself, tempts us to. As I say, sometimes it's very obvious. You can look at somebody and you can see them in the vice of sin; you can see them in the misery of their enslavement, but very, very many people are under the dominion of sin and they don't even realize it, perhaps even a more dangerous situation than the person who is very obviously and miserably in the grip of sin.

So there is the slavery of sin, the power of sin, the penalty of sin, the curse of sin, the punishment that is due to sin with all the fear that that evokes in our minds and hearts. Many of us here, no doubt, can remember it, probably some of us here still know much about this. You may be in it right now. You know the power of sin's enslavement. You know the fear. You know the pain of conscience. You know the dread. As you look ahead, you sense the punishment that is due. These are terrible chains to be wearing, aren't they? They clank. They drag us down. They make us miserable.

So there are, you might say, sin chains, but then are also good work chains. Good work chains. That might seem a really odd expression but the Bible portrays those who are seeking salvation by good works as also being in bondage. Remember, the Lord Jesus looked out and saw people who were weary and heavy-laden; they were laboring; they were trying their best to get to heaven with their greatest and best efforts, and he looks at them and he sees that they're weighed down, they're wearing a miserable and uncomfortable yoke that's wearing them down and wearing them out and he says, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." He's saying, All these good works that you're putting yourself under, all these good intentions, all these good resolutions, they're nothing more than a bunch of chains that are miserable to wear, come to me and I'll give you rest. I'll free you from this as a way of salvation."

Again, I'm sure there are people here who remember these chains and some here who may still be wearing them even this night. You've walked in this church, as it were, clanking. You might not have heard it but the Lord heard it. Maybe even viewing your coming to church as a good work that will play a part and your attaining of heaven and yet, surely in our most insightful moments, we realize it's not good enough, however good enough, it's not good enough. We know that if we have any self-understanding that even our best works are mixed up with so much of selfishness and so little of God. And, of course, there is still the problem of evil works that come alongside. This too is a bondage; it's a slavery. The drug addict, the gambler, the alcoholic, the sex addict, yes, they're all in bondage but so is the self-righteous and the moral and the good neighbor and the good citizen if they are making that the basis for their salvation. Both are forms of slavery.

But there's a third set of chains and we might call it a ceremonial or ritual chains and we're coming closer to that in this letter. There is no question that Paul's words apply to sin chains and good work chains, but in this particular context, they are especially addressed to those who were in ceremonial chains, meaning they were seeing religious ceremony, religious ritual, religious habits as the basis for their salvation. They were looking back to the Old Testament ceremonies and rituals and laws and they were making that the basis for their salvation and Paul really sums it all up with the word "circumcision" as we'll see shortly and these were people who were viewing these religious traditions, these religious practices, these ceremonies and rituals as the basis for their salvation and if they did them enough and often enough and well enough, that these would be a means of salvation. Again, this is a very common state of chains that people choose to wear.

I remember staying with a couple in Hungary in the later 80s and the older man, the husband of the house, was a lovely godly believer who suffered a lot under communist persecution and he loved grace and he loved salvation and he loved the Lord but his wife was a Roman Catholic and a very devout Roman Catholic and she was, again, a lovely lady, just a gem of a lady, just so hospitable, so kind, so loving, but she was in utter bondage. She lived maybe three minutes away from a very large Roman Catholic chapel and she was there, I think sometimes three times a day; various Masses, various rituals, various services and if she missed one of these, you could almost see the terror in her face. And her husband, I remember him pleading with her with tears over the table that she would cease from this ceaseless round of ritual and ceremony and really building her whole hope of salvation upon them which was clear as the husband spoke to her and he would say, "Look, if you really trusted Christ, you would give these up even for a time to show." But she wouldn't. She couldn't. She daren't. But you don't need to be a Roman Catholic to wear ceremonial chains. You can be Reformed as well and wear ceremonial chains. You can make the Reformed ritual as much a bondage as any other, thinking that it's your salvation, the churchgoing and all the things that go along with that. They are equally dangerous, potentially deadly, and we might add as, again, some of us might know or still know equally miserable.

Then there's a fourth set of chains and it's really the third and fourth are the particular concern of the apostle here in this chapter. The fourth set of chains are, we might call them, man-made chains. In some ways they're all man-made but really what I'm trying to say here is the chains of human opinion. The chains of human tradition. Here are people who have sort of lost sight of the core of the Gospel. They have lost sight of Christ if they ever had sight of him at all, and they've begun to develop a religion of their own made up of mere human traditions. Now, there are good human traditions. Good human traditions are traditions that grow out of the word of God, are consistent with the word of God. You think, for example, of we have two services on a Sunday, one at 9:30 and one at 6 p.m. That's a human tradition and it's a good human tradition. There is nowhere in the Bible that says that you should do that exactly but there is enough in the Bible to suggest an evening and a morning service are wise and helpful for God's people on a Sunday. But there are many other areas, aren't there, where the human tradition is either not based on the Bible or against what is in the Bible. We might call them our own prejudices or our own preferences often in areas of eating and drinking, of what we wear, maybe of how we school our children, the particular methodologies that we use. It might be to do with hobbies and sports, what is and isn't allowed, and none of them have any basis in the word of God. They may even be contrary to the word of God and yet we make that our religion. The religion that we impose not just upon ourselves but even more dangerously upon others and that's the particular concern that the apostle has here as well. Not just the ceremonial chains that the Judaizers were coming along and padlocking onto these souls but also the human traditions that the Pharisaical amongst them are coming along and chaining on others and demanding obedience and compliance with their own personal preferences and desires.

That too is a misery. That is a misery to make up your own religion based on your own personal preferences, your own personal characteristic, maybe your own personal background, that has absolutely no connection with the word of God or is even contrary to the word of God but it seems so natural and normal to you because it's all you've known, and yet the devil can use that too like cyanide to kill your soul; to destroy you and even make you a spreader of cyanide into the lives of others. That's why the apostle here says, "Seek liberty. Seek liberty. Seek freedom from sin chains, from good work chains, from ceremonial chains and from human opinion chains. Make sure you are free." And how can we do this but by Christ alone, the great Emancipator, the great Liberator, the one who alone is able to snap the most powerful, long-standing, rusted, heavy chains of sin, of good works, of ceremonies and of human opinion and traditions? Who else can do this but he? And if he do it, none can undo it because the sun shall set, you're free; you shall be free indeed.

Not all freedom is good freedom but this freedom is the best freedom of all. If you are in chains this evening, pray to him that he would come and deliver you; that he would snap them; that you be free of the dominion of sin, the power of sin, the slave master of sin; that you'd be free from good works as a way of salvation; that you'd be free from ceremonies and rituals; that you'd be free from your own human man-made religion and the opinions of others. Oh, what freedom is that. There is nothing like it. That's what Christ gives. Seek it. Ask for it.

But then, secondly here, enjoy it. Enjoy liberty. Enjoy freedom. We do, don't we? The freedoms that we have in this country are a great joy and we're beginning to sense some of these freedoms being withdrawn or threatened and we know the fear that comes along with that, don't we? But however great the freedoms we have, there is a much greater freedom here to be enjoyed. We have freedom of worship, freedom to vote, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, these are all precious valuable freedoms to be enjoyed, political freedoms. Also social freedoms, the freedom that we have to choose where we live and choose what kind of job we want to do and choose where we want to go to school. All these things are amazing freedoms denied to vast tracts of this world and millions and millions of people, and people have died to give us these freedoms. Social mobility, geographical freedom that we can travel here, there and everywhere. It's a wonderful freedom, precious freedom, enjoyable freedom. Financial freedom too, to be free of debt; to be free of the chains of poverty and indebtedness and oppression, economic oppression. That's a wonderful freedom too. You just need to listen to Dave Ramsey every night and you hear these people making their debt-free screams. You hear the joy, don't you? And why not? It's a wonderful freedom. But however much they scream about financial freedom, how ever enjoyable that new life is, there is something far greater here to be enjoyed; to be free of the chains of sin; to be free of the chains of good works as a way of salvation; to be free of ceremonies and rituals; to be free of human opinion dictating our lives. Is that not freedom to be enjoyed? That is a freedom that we should be studying, a freedom that we should be building understanding of, freedom that we should be meditating upon, freedom that we should be talking about and describing and teaching, freedom that we should be spreading, freedom that we should be enjoying more and more and more.

This verse can literally be translated, "For freedom, Christ has set you free." That's why he freed you, for freedom. Not to bring you into another prison. Not to put another set of chains on you. For freedom, Christ has set you free. This is his great aim, his ultimate purpose that when he listens to your life, he doesn't hear one clank, one chink, one chain dragging on the ground. That's his delight, to see his people living free lives, free from the power of sin, free from the power of the devil. No longer under his dictatorship. Free from good works as a way of salvation. He loves to see that. Not just that we take our sins and lay them at his feet and ask for forgiveness but that we also take our good works and say we flee from these too. We don't want anything of them involved in our standing before God.

And then to take all the rituals and ceremonies, all the churchgoing and lots of these things are good as well, but not as a way of salvation. And many of us can look back on years and years and years, not just of coming to church and giving money to the church but even of being members in the church, even of sitting at the Lord's Table, even of getting our children baptized and we look at it and we realize one day, "That was the whole basis of my salvation. That was my hope. What was I thinking of that this could ever be a basis for God accepting me? These are just chains when they're viewed like this, chains to be thrown away."

And oh, how Christ loves to see his people living free from human opinion, free from the preferences and prejudices of others being forced upon us. The beautiful section in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 20, section 2, it says, "God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word or beside it in matters of faith and worship." In other words, it's not just human opinions and human commandments and human traditions and human preferences that are against God's word that we're free from but any even that are beside it, that are placed along it. They may not be contradicting God's word, God's word may not condemn them, but if they are not out of this word and implications and applications of this word, then these too we are utterly free from. And every time you hear in your own conscience, in your own mind, "I should. You should. I should. They should. We should," the first question you should ask is this: is this a commandment of men? Is this a mere human preference? Is this just a tradition? If so, if so, we have to stop. We have to pause. We have to see these as chains, as bondage, and we have to put them off and we dare not try and chain others up in them as well and whenever you think of somebody and something and you may see their lives, you may see what they wear, you may see what sports they do, you may see their hobbies, you may see what they read, you may see how they pray, you may see what books they read, whatever, whether it's the way they school or the way that they conduct themselves in other areas of life, if it's not commanded or forbidden by God's word, the apostle's word is, "Break the chains. Don't even begin to put them on someone else. Enjoy your freedom and help others to enjoy it too." God alone is Lord of the conscience. How dare we, how dare we step into people's consciences as their lord? God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word or beside it as matters of faith or worship. Enjoy this liberty. Enjoy it. It's so precious. It's so precious.

But above all, what the apostle here is saying is defend this liberty. Not just seek it, not just enjoy it but defend it and the language here is of a battle, of a war. It's anticipating a conflict. It's anticipating that this is going to be a great problem, that either we or others are going to be tempted to take chains and put them on ourselves or put them on others and he's saying, "Stand fast." It's a rallying cry to defend the most precious and valuable freedoms in the world. If we are prepared to die for American freedom, how much more for this kind of spiritual freedom? There is nothing greater than this freedom and there are many effects to it. Exactly the same chains that fell off are the same chains that are continually trying to get on us again and that maybe others are trying to put on us again and certainly the devil is trying to put on us again. And as they come with their barrel loads of chains, the chains in all these categories, the sin chains, the good work chains, the ceremonial chains and the human tradition chains, the apostle is saying, "Fight for your lives! This is a battle of life or death!" You've got to view these chains as nothing less and, in fact, much more than even potassium cyanide. That's how dangerous this is. That's how hard you've got to fight.

And he's saying fight it with the same weapons that broke the chains in the first place which is the person and work of Christ. When sin comes to tempt you and to bring you back in chains, what must you do but think upon Christ and his work and his death and

his ransom and his suffering and sacrifice. Am I going to go back to those chains that he died to smash in pieces? When good works sneak up on us and begin to insinuate themselves into our lives saying, "Hey, this is pretty good. You've done really well here. You know you've got a really good track record in this area. That's really something you can be pretty proud about." Take the Gospel and smash it to smithereens. Put not the slightest confidence in it. They may look good, they may look attractive, they may look like beautiful garments to put on but the word of God describes them as chains; as a heavy yoke that will ultimately crush us and condemn us. He says, "Be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. You were there before. You've tried this pattern. You know it doesn't work. You know it doesn't bring freedom and life and liberty and joy. Give it up. Fight against it."

When we're tempted to put our confidence in religious ritual or in human tradition, when we're tempted to live our lives according to the preferences and prejudices of others that have no basis in the word of God, then again the apostle is saying, "Stand fast. Be strong to resist and to fight. Don't view this as something harmless and, 'Well, it's not big deal.' It's a massive deal," he is saying. Don't compromise. Don't give an inch, don't give a millimeter. Think of the cost of your freedom. That's why we treasure American freedom as we look back and we see the cost of blood and treasure. To this day, we still value that as we see many men and women giving their lives in law enforcement at home and the military abroad and covert and overt operations. We value that. We honor that. We fight for that. We support the fight for that. How much more this?

Think of the cost. Not the blood of men, even a million men, but the blood of the Son of God and we're going to give that up for chains? Think of the cost. Think of the consequences because here the apostle goes on to say, "If you be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing." He's saying, he's really, it's not just circumcision, he's talking about the whole ceremonial system and he's seeing circumcision as the doorway into that and he says, "If you walk through that doorway, you've not just opened a doorway, you've closed another. You've closed the door on Christ. You've turned your back on Christ and therefore he profits you nothing. Nothing. Remember, if Christ is not everything, he's nothing." He's saying, "If you go through that door, if you begin to take that path, I testify to you, to every man that's circumcised, he's a debtor to do the whole law." Don't think that you can have a wee bit of law and then a lot of grace. He's saying, "You mix this, grace is gone. Grace is gone." You take the smallest crystal of cyanide and you mix it with Christ and you've got death. You've got death.

That's why he's saying this is a battle, this is a fight. We must use all the weapons he has given us. Think not only of the cost, not only of the consequences but also of the confusion of the message whenever we go down one of these routes; whenever we put these chains on or try and put them on others, it messes up the whole Gospel message. The consequences, the confusion is immense. Stand fast therefore. Stand fast. Do not move. Don't let even the smallest dinky little chain be put anywhere upon your life. Don't let one sin have dominion over you again. Don't let one good work begin to insert itself into your basis of believing on God. Don't let one ceremony, one rite, one church membership, one Lord's Supper even, don't let any of that come into your hope of

salvation. Don't let one of your own preferences or of anyone else's come in and steal this blood bought liberty. And God forbid, oh, may God forbid that anyone of us would be a means of bringing another into bondage. You see how serious it is. So I ask you once more: if you ever find yourself thinking, "He should do this or she should not do that or this church should be this or this church should not be that," every time "should" appears in your mind, big blue flashing lights and sirens should be sounding and should be seen and your next instinctive question must be, "Is this the word of God or just my word, my preference, my prejudice, my opinion, my background?" Stand fast. Stand so sure and firm in the liberty with which Christ has made you free. Seek it. Enjoy it. Defend it and defend others as well with all your defending for Christ's sake. Amen.

Let's pray.