

God's Dream of Freedom

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 12, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Galatians 5:1-15](#)

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The subject is Christian freedom. That's what Paul is writing about in this chapter of his letter to the Galatians. He is writing about a call to freedom, and in that freedom to become a slave to love.

We know that some of the authentic letters of Paul are more like hearing one side of a telephone conversation than they are a theological treatise or a systematic theology (though Paul can head in that direction even in these letter-writing dialogues). We can infer that there were some in Galatia who thought that to be a true follower of Jesus a man needs to be circumcised. Some who held this position may have argued that the circumcision was a precondition to Christian conversion, while others may have thought that circumcision was a necessary step after Christian conversion. The details of their positions aren't completely clear to me.

What is clear is that Paul has had it with a whole bunch of them. For Paul, faith is enough. You don't need to wear a cross around your neck. You don't need to wear a "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelet on your wrist. You certainly don't need to be circumcised. What you need is to be a person of faith – a person who trusts God, a person who is trustworthy, a person who sees the creation and its Creator as loving.

Now, I can understand the argument in favor of circumcision. Jesus was a Jew, an heir of the covenant of Abraham. And the sign of that covenant within Judaism was (and remains) circumcision. So, if we're going to be Jesus-followers, shouldn't we become Jewish to become Christian? And if we become Jewish, then the guys need to be circumcised.

Paul's response to those who make this argument, if you'll allow the paraphrase, is: "Since you're so keen on circumcision, why stop there? Cut off the whole thing!"¹

Paul says that if you want to be subject to the law (that is the Jewish laws laid out in the Torah), then go be subject to the laws. You'll fail them and they'll fail you, but go ahead. I'll stick to being subject to Jesus, which means being subject to love.

My colleague Donna Schaper says that "Maybe you don't need to read this chapter. You may have no issues about right and wrong cultural customs, the right way to dress for church, the right foods to eat in Lent. You may never have spoken of chocolate cake as 'sinful' or scoffed at someone who was obese. You may attend church meetings and tolerate all the points of view expressed by other members. If so, skip this chapter.

¹ Chris Mereschuk, "Skin in the Game," *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* email dated and received 28 June 2023.

"If, however, you find yourself coiled culturally, intolerant of difference, unkind when someone smokes in public or brings a dog to a meeting, turn to Galatians 5 and sit down for the long read. You will learn what it means to be in love with each other...."²

It would have been nice if Paul's admonitions in Galatians 5 settled the matter, at least in the church, once and for all. But people are people. There are still plenty of church leaders who require people to change their identity or their beliefs and values in order to be considered Christians by them. It doesn't matter if they think those changes need to happen before or after conversion, it's essentially the same thing. I'm sure you can all think of someone like that, and if not a specific person, at least a type of person. At this moment in our history, I can think of people who, like the troublemakers who drew Paul's indignation, seem focused on genitalia³ – who has what type and what they do with them and what bathroom they use. And in my judgment about that, I become one of those troublemakers who says, "Well, they aren't *real* Christians."

When Paul calms down and writes with less heat and more light, he makes things clearer. Maybe I need to calm down, too. Paul writes, "The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Paul's words are, if you'll pardon the expression, cutting. He's saying: "If you're going to do one part of something as a bold demonstration of commitment, know that you also need to do all the other parts that go with it."⁴ So maybe I should hear this passage as a call to examine all that is connected to what I proclaim. Maybe I should be asking myself, "What does that which I proclaim required of me?" And my answer needs to be not only the stuff I want to do anyway. My answer needs to include the stuff I don't want to do and that is required of me anyway. And there is stuff that love requires of me that I don't want to do.

I've notice that lately I'm not as patient as I want to be. I'm more on edge. I get frustrated more easily. My tolerance for mistakes – my own and others' – is low. I worry about my bark, because the bark is sometimes a bite. I bet we've all had the experience of being chewed out by someone. That chewing comes as words. If you've experienced that and I was the one who did the chewing, I apologize.

I don't think I'm the only one who's feeling more on edge. I've seen it online, people snapping at each other with amazing ease. I've seen it in meetings, when people aren't listening carefully and so they think they're arguing about some point when, actually, they agree with each other. Because they miss what the other person is saying, they keep nipping at them. I wonder how often I'm the one doing the nipping because I am not listening carefully and curiously to what the other person is saying.

It's so sad when the church devours one of its own. Death by hundreds of tiny bites. Paul warns the Galatians about this. "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."⁵ It would be nice if we more fully embodied that single commandment, if we loved our neighbors as ourselves.

² Donna Schaper, "Give Up Judging," *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* email dated and received 25 March 2025.

³ Matt Laney, "Mutilating the Gospel," *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* email dated and received 30 June 2023.

⁴ Chris Mereschuk, *op. cit.*

⁵ Galatians 5:14-15, *NRSVue*.

And I really do mean more fully! I don't want some kind of "performative civility," as Chris Mereschuk calls it.⁶ I want to love with empathy, and compassion, and grace. And I want to be loved with empathy, compassion, and grace.

In this time when speaking out against injustice and evil is so important, I want to do so with that kind of love. Which means it would probably be a good idea if I took a moment to make sure I'm speaking the truth in love, and not just wanting my words to take a bite out of someone who has angered me. "Chewing someone out might fill me up for a minute, but it ultimately makes me sick to my stomach and leaves the other person deeply wounded."⁷

I suppose that a product of living in California for a couple decades is that there are probably a few wildfires that you specifically remember. One for me is the Carr fire of 2018, up in Trinity and Shasta Counties. I remember this fire because it came very close to burning down French Gulch, the childhood home of one of my dear friends.

The practice (in California, at least) is to name a fire based on where it starts or is first reported. The Carr fire (Carr with two Rs) was named that because it was first reported near the intersection of Highway 299 and Carr Powerhouse Road. It could have been called the Carr fire (if they spelled it with one R) because it was started by a car – except this happens much too frequently and the name would become unhelpful. Cars pulling trailers too often end up dragging a safety chain, which causes a spark, which ignites a fire.

In the case of the Carr fire, it wasn't a chain. It was a trailer tire blowout that left the rim to scrape on the pavement causing the sparks that started the fire.⁸ Still the image of a chain being dragged causing a fire is a potent one.⁹

How often we are set free and still drag the chains of bondage with us through life. We may have found freedom from the bondage of addiction in a recovery program, and still we drag the chains in our unreleased shame. We may have found freedom from the disappointment of unmet expectations, and still we drag the chain in our fear that we will have to face that disappointment again. We may have found freedom from the bondage of a toxic or abusive relationship, and still we drag the chains in our resistance to trust and to intimacy.

Those chains we drag can spark wildfires – in our relationships, in our churches, in our communities. Even in our bodies. It's time to put down those chains and accept the freedom Christ brings. If we have gotten used to the less-than-ideal way things are, let's put down the chains and claim the freedom Christ brings. If we are wallowing in regret and remorse, let's put down the chains and claim the freedom Christ brings. If we notice a resignation to oppression and injustice, disappointment and division, loneliness and fear, let's put down the chains and claim the freedom Christ brings.

⁶ Chris Mereschuk, "Accidental Cannibals," *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* email dated and received 24 May 2025.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Carr Fire," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carr_Fire (accessed 11 October 2025).

⁹ Phiwa Langeni, "For Freedom's Sake," *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* email dated and received 12 September 2025.

For freedom Christ has set us free!

“When Harriet Tubman made her escape from a plantation in Dorchester, Md., she described what it felt like when she realized she’d crossed the Mason-Dixon line to freedom in Pennsylvania: ‘When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.’

“‘Glory over everything’ – she had a beautiful way of describing her experiences.”¹⁰ For Tubman, crossing that line into freedom brought ‘glory over everything.’

When I think about God’s dream of freedom, it is not limited to the preposition “from.” God does not simply want us to be free *from* all the various bondages we suffer. God dreams for us to be free *for* as well. God dreams of a freedom *for* healing – healing for ourselves, for our neighbors, for our world. God dreams of a freedom *for* empowerment and strength – a freedom that calls us to share that freedom by demanding justice for the vulnerable and oppressed. God dreams of a freedom *for* love – a love that is full and bold – to love ourselves, to love our friends, to love our enemies, to love the earth.

For freedom Christ has set us free.

Amen.

Questions for contemplation:

- What does that which you proclaim about Jesus require of you?
- Does your bark every become biting?
- What are the chains you continue to drag through life?
- What is one way that your dream of freedom and God’s dream of freedom overlap?

¹⁰ T. Denise Anderson, “Crossing into Freedom,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/crossing-freedom> (accessed 6 October 2025).