

Free In Christ ---- “The Liberty by Which Christ Has Made Us Free”

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There are passages of Scripture in the New Testament that speak of our “liberty” or “freedom” as Christians. No Christian would want to have his freedom in Christ taken away. And, when this subject is properly understood, none should fear that those who oppose the most liberal interpretation of this subject are about to rob Christians of their freedom in Christ. The issue that divides Christians on the subject of liberty is, what is to be made of the passages of Scripture that address this subject? Just what does freedom mean in the Bible? Freed from what, and freed to what?

Freedom From What?

Paul admonishes the Galatians, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free” (Gal. 5:1). What is this freedom that Christ has given us? Sometimes it means freedom *as deliverance*. Christians have been delivered from the guilt and power of sin (Rom. 6:18). They are freed from an accusing conscience (Heb. 10:22), and from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:10). They have even been delivered from the power of Satan (2 Tim 2:26; Heb. 2:14). But none of this appears to be Paul’s point in Galatians 5:1.

A careful reading of the book of Galatians shows that Paul is speaking of freedom *from the law of Moses*. In the first four chapters he has been dealing with the problem that the law poses. Through Christ man has been delivered from the curse which the law brings upon those who attempt to be justified by it (Gal. 3:10-13).

From what Paul says in Galatians 5:13 we conclude that he also is concerned about the problem of sin. “For you, brethren,” Paul says, “have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” His first warning was, be sure to continue in the freedom Christ has given you (5:1). They were not to return to the law which would bring them into bondage again. The reason he gave was they had been freed from the law by Jesus Christ. Here in Galatians 5:13 he reminds them of that same freedom. But their new freedom from the law does not give them license to sin. It is easy for one to misunderstand freedom, and we shall see plenty of evidence for that as we proceed.

Our “Rights” and Liberty in Christ

As Christians we all have “rights.” But is this the “freedom” Paul discusses in his letters? Consider the word “rights” for just a moment. The word in the New Testament that conveys this idea is the word *exousia*. This word means “authority, power” (*exousia*), and it “signifies a divinely given authority and freedom to act” (N. J. Oppewall *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [Revised] 4:192). This word

is used in connection with “freedom to act” in such places as Romans 9:21 and 1 Corinthians 9:12, 15, 18. In the first passage, Paul asks, “Does not the potter have *power* (*exousia*) over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” It speaks of God’s “power,” or God’s *right* in that sense, to make of one as he chooses. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul is discussing his “right” (*exousia*) to receive support, or be paid wages, for his work in preaching the gospel. His authority as an apostle gave him a valid claim to be supported by the Corinthians, even though he freely renounced this “right” in order to be more effective in this particular circumstance.

There are also those passages of Scripture that speak of our “liberty” or “freedom” (*eleutheria*, a different word from *exousia*) as we have just noted in Galatians 5:1, 13. What is to be made of such passages? Are they speaking of our “freedom to act,” as the word *exousia* does, or do they have something else in mind? Just what does freedom mean? Freed from what, and freed to what? As we have seen from Galatians 5:1, the subject is not “freedom to act.”

Actually, one’s “right” to do something, or his freedom to act, falls within the scope of divine authority; it “signifies a divinely given authority.” Apart from this we would not have the “freedom to act.” This means that our freedom in this sense is never to be thought of as being totally independent of God or God’s *law*. This is why James can speak of “the perfect law of liberty” as he does in James 1:25 (this verse is considered below). Whether the “liberty” of this verse means deliverance, such as deliverance from sin and the law, or the freedom to act, which is not the usual meaning of this word, it is here directly connected to “law.” Paul also had a high view of God’s law for this age, as we are about to see.

When advocating the “freedom” of the Christian, some, in deprecating “law,” would leave no room for *law* and *liberty* in the same phrase as we find them brought together in James 1:25. For many these are contradictory terms. But how could this be? If there were a contradiction James would not use them together as he does in this passage. In fact, one could well ask, how can there be liberty, in either of the two meanings of that word, where there is no law?

Meaning and Purpose of Law

What is law, and what purpose does it serve? The subject may be viewed from two sides.

1. Law Restrains and Reveals Sin. Where there is no restraint there is the worse kind of slavery. Is this not the problem with the drunkard or the dope addict? Without restraint he subjects himself to the most hopeless and abject kind of slavery. When Paul says in Galatians 3:19 that the law was “added because of transgressions” this is the side of law he is describing. In relation to sin the law was given for two purposes: (1) to restrain sin, and (2) to reveal and make sin known.

Paul elsewhere shows that the law served both of these purposes. First, *it restrained sin through its punishments*. Paul shows this in 1 Timothy 1:9-10: “Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any

other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine.”

The law also served the purpose of *revealing and making known sin* so man might know what sin is. Paul says, “for by the law is a knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). The law itself is not sin; yet, “I had not known sin,” he says, “but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, ‘Thou shalt not covet’” (Rom. 7:7). It was only by the law that man could see the “exceeding sinfulness of sin,” or how bad sin really is (Rom. 7:13).

2. Law Provides Guidance. The other side of law is the *guidance it provides for man*. Man needs guidance for his life, a standard by which to walk in a dark world. He is not capable of providing such a standard for himself; he cannot direct his own steps (Jer. 10:23). So God made his law available for man so man would have the direction he needs. Jesus lived and died under the old law and he acknowledged the written word of God to be a guide for man (Matt. 4:4). It was by his appeals to this written word of God that Jesus was able to overcome each temptation put before him (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10).

“Law” in the New Testament

1. The Law of God. In Romans 7:22 Paul says, “I delight in the law of God in the inward man.” Here God’s law (the law that finds its origin in him) is put in contrast with another law or rule which Paul found to be at work in his life. This “other law” is described in vv. 21, 23, and 25. This “law in my members” which Paul describes refers to the tendency or rule in him to be influenced by the appetites and passions belonging to the flesh which when yielded to produce sin. The “law” that is so described refers to the authority or rule of sin in him. In contrast to this law is “the law of God” in which Paul finds delight in his inner self or nature. In his spirit, or in his inner person, Paul joyfully agrees with the law of God.

The carnal mind, Paul shows in Romans 8:7, is not subject to “the law of God.” Such a mind cannot receive and cannot obey the instructions coming from the law of God. Such a mind does not have the power to be subject to, or obey, the instructions that come to him from God’s law. One does not have to have this kind of mind, but as long as one chooses to be dominated by the flesh (allows his mind to think of fleshly things), he cannot submit to the instructions of God’s law.

2. The Law of Faith. Another way in which the word “law” is used in the New Testament is in connection with the word “faith” and in contrast with “works” of merit. In Romans 3:27 Paul asks, “Where is the boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.” In the context the subject is salvation made possible through the blood of Jesus Christ. Salvation on these grounds leaves no place for boasting. Boasting is allowed only when one is justified on the merits of one’s works. “Through what law,” Paul asks, is boasting excluded? Is it excluded through “works,” that is, through the law of works? Certainly not, he says. A “law of works” would provide grounds for boasting if one could be justified on this basis, or through such a system.

By “law” Paul means a principle, rule, or system. Boasting would not be excluded if one were justified through a system of works, but as he goes on to say, it *is* excluded through the rule or system of faith. If one were to keep God’s law perfectly, which is what he must do in order to be justified by law,

or a system, of “works” (see Gal. 3:10-13), then he would have grounds for boasting. But there is never reason for boasting through a system of faith. After one sins and forgiveness is needed there can never be any grounds for boasting. It then becomes a matter of grace through faith. Since all have sinned, according to v. 23, salvation cannot be on the basis of “works,” so Paul says, “therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (v. 28).

This is not to say that under such a system of faith obedience to God’s law is being set aside, or that under “faith” such obedience to God’s law is no longer important or necessary. But it does say that one does not keep God’s law without infraction (v. 23), and that since this is the case, a mere law system (what Paul calls a “law of works”) can never acquit because there is no provision in such a system to cover sins. Once one becomes a lawbreaker no “works of law” can ever acquit and bring justification before God. It then takes propitiation, the kind Paul has described in the previous verses of this chapter (vv. 23-26).

3. The Law of Christ. Paul also shows that we are “under [the] law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21). What does this mean? In this passage of Scripture Paul is describing his own situation in relation to the law of Moses. He has just said (in v. 20-21a) that in his work as an apostle he approached those who were “under the law” (i. e., the Jews, who were under the law of Moses) as being “under the law.” He did the same for those who were “without law” (i. e., the Gentiles, who were not under the law of Moses). He treated them as people who were “without law.” He is contrasting his different ways of working among the Jews and Gentiles.

After making this point about becoming all things to all men, Paul then shows that at the time he was writing this letter he was not under the law of Moses — “though not being myself under the law.” This part of v. 20 is not found in the KJV, but the earliest manuscripts clearly favor its inclusion in the text. The NKJV points this out when it adds the footnote, “NU-Text adds *though not being myself under the law.*” This means that the earliest manuscripts include the phrase. Other English versions like the NASB and the NIV include it.

The phrase shows that Paul was no longer under the law of Moses, but this does not mean that he was without law, because, as he goes on to say, he was “under [the] law of Christ.” This clearly shows that the law of Moses and the law of Christ are not the same, and that one is under only one law at a time. We are under the law of Christ today. The old law has been removed and replaced by the law of Christ.

4. The Law of Liberty. What is meant by “law of liberty” in James 1:25? James means *a law which gives liberty* to those who bring themselves under its authority. Indeed, only those who live in accordance with God’s word are truly free. Manton points out that “duty is the greatest liberty, and sin the greatest bondage”[164] (quoted by Vaughan *James* 40).

One of the functions of law, you will remember, is to provide direction and guidance. Law is a standard by which life is regulated. Why else would one *look so intently into* (this is the meaning of the word “look” in this verse) this perfect law if he did not expect to find the guidance he needs for his life?

But in this context, what is meant by the term “law”? It is best understood in light of what was said of the “implanted word” which is able to save our souls in v. 21. It is the “word” of v. 23 which one must obey and not merely hear. What part of law does one obey? Only the part that gives him instructions or

examples to follow, or commands to implement. Whatever this “implanted word” is that one must receive, and whatever the “word” is that must be obeyed, *it contains those things that one must “do.”* This passage states that one must be a “doer” of the “word.” In other words, God’s “implanted word” of v. 21 and his “word” of v. 23 is the same as “the perfect law of liberty” of v. 25. One is not dealing fairly with the word of God when he makes the law of God one thing and the teachings he is to receive and examples he is to follow, as well as the commands he must obey, something else. Commands are a part of the law of Christ, and as has always been the case, God’s commands must be obeyed.

The next word in this phrase is the word “liberty.” We have seen Paul use this word to describe freedom from the law of Moses in Galatians 5:1 and 5:13. At other places it is the freedom made possible by God’s law; a freedom from the bondage of sin and death.

5. The Law of the Spirit of Life. A well known example of God’s law in this sense is what Paul says in Romans 8:2: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.” What made Paul free? He says it was “the law of the Spirit of life.” Notice how he uses the word “law” here. Law, as we have seen, sometimes means a principle of action, or system; it may also mean a rule or standard of conduct. Here “law” is a rule of conduct for Christians. This law is described as the law of “the Spirit of life”; that is, the law communicated by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 2:10-13).

The Spirit who revealed and made known the word of God is the Spirit “of life.” These added words are important. The source of the new life we have in Christ is the Spirit, but it is through his “law,” that revealed by the Spirit, or the gospel of our salvation, that this new *life* is given. The gospel is God’s power unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). At one’s initial obedience to the gospel he is “made . . . free from the law of sin and death,” Paul adds. This “law of sin and death” is the law that works in our members, described in some detail in Romans 7. He describes this change that had been brought about in his brethren at Rome in Romans 6:16-18.

This same kind of freedom is also attributed to Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). In Romans 8:2 Paul describes this freedom as being due to one’s union with Christ: “For the law of the Spirit of life *in Christ Jesus* hath made me free from the law of sin and death.”

Thus far we have seen that the “liberty” of the gospel frees from the law of Moses, but that it also frees from sin. Another kind of freedom the gospel brings is freedom from the *power* of sin. The first part of Romans 6:14 says, “for sin shall not have dominion over you.” The reason why sin no longer has dominion over the Christian is given in the last part of the same verse: “for ye are not under the law, but under grace” (see the next chapter for our discussion of this subject). This does not mean that we are not under any law at all, but that we are no longer under a mere law system which can result only in condemnation. As Hamilton states, “There is the assurance that the condemnation that comes to those who have only law will not be the eventual outcome because grace takes care of what nothing could atone simply under a system of law. If one has only law, and no grace, then the rule, control, or lordship of sin prevails in condemnation. Once one violates law, sin is the result. Obedience to law can never remove sin; only the blood of Christ can on the condition of an obedient faith” (*The Book of Romans* 395).

In James 1:25 James shows how one is blessed or benefitted by looking intently into God's word. The person who *lives* in this freedom will be blessed by God, not the person who only *learns* about it. "Within the boundaries of the law of God man is free, for there he lives in the environment God designed for him. When he crosses the boundary, he becomes a slave to sin. As long as he keeps the law, he is free" (Kistemaker *James and I-II John* 62).

6. The Law of Love. In Romans 13:10 Paul says "love is the fulfilling of the law." There is no article in the Greek text with the word "law," even though one is supplied in the KJV giving the rendering "the law." One might suppose that Paul has the law of Moses in mind since he quotes from it in the preceding verse, but this is not conclusive. He likely is speaking of law in general in v. 10; thus, "love is the fulfilling of law." The "law of love" is the principle of love that fulfills law. Love, in other words, is the principle that should govern our relation with others.

Law requires that we do no harm to our neighbor. Love enables us to bring to completion this requirement placed upon us by law. In this way love is a "fulfilling of law." It is the principle that brings out the best in us in our relation to our neighbor. Hamilton makes this important observation: "One should not interpret this passage to mean that love is all embracing of the law of God, and that nothing else is necessary. One needs to keep the statement in context. He is not talking about every rule or law of God, but rather, he is speaking of the principle of love that should govern one in his relation to others" (730).

— **That They All May Be One*, pp. 59-66 (Copyright 2003)