

AMAZING GRACE – Part 17

'Freedom, Freedom, Freedom!'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Our life in Christ is characterised by dignity, freedom, flexibility and self-government, or to be more precise, Spirit-government. However, as we've seen in many different ways throughout this teaching as well as in our own experience, people seem to give up their freedom too easily. Why is it that some people, set free by God's grace, make free choices to return to bondage? The Apostle Paul questions the believers in the Galatian Church:

Galatians 4:8-11 *"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather, are known by God – how is it that you are returning to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you."*

He wants to know why they would give up the freedom of intimacy with God for rules and religion, trying to manipulate Him when He has already given them all things in Christ. Paul is scratching his head over these believers who are now trying once again to impress one another (and even God!?) with their performances. Let's look at more of Paul's confronting teaching in Galatians 5.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. (Perhaps the most terrifying verse in the whole Bible!) Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Religious dead works). Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, (or do any of these dead religious works) Christ will be of no value to you at all . . ."

If you turn to religion, you've turned your back on Jesus Christ. How much clearer can he be?

". . . Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. (And we know that no one can obey the whole law.) You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."

There are only two choices – you can be related to God by trying to be good; or you can be related to God through Jesus.

Galatians 5:1-6 *"But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."*

Verse 1 encapsulates this whole passage and possibly the whole message of the New Testament.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

It is difficult to imagine a more radical or extreme definition of authentic humanity. God's purpose in setting us free in Christ is not first of all to go into all the world and preach the Gospel; or become a missionary; or serve the local Church; or find our destiny - He set us free, first and foremost, for freedom itself. **God made us free to be authentically who we were created to be.**

Many people have difficulty with this concept because it is not what is taught by religious teachers. They effectively preach (but would never express it this way!) that you come out of the bondage of sin and rebellion straight into the bondage of religion. The devil wins both ways – the effect is the same - we are robbed of our God-given freedom. The devil's plan is to keep us away from Christ and he doesn't mind how that happens ... in Church or out of Church ... either way is OK with him. In fact I believe it's easier for Satan to keep people away from Christ in Church! Religion is much more subtle than full-on rebellion because the modern day Pharisees do not recognise how far from Christ they have strayed.

The Westminster confession of 1646 states: *"The chief end of man is to worship God and enjoy Him forever."* That sounds great but think if you had asked Paul what was the chief end of man when he was writing to the Galatians, I think he'd say: *"To get free and stay free, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit."* Paul doesn't want to see Jesus' die in vain for anyone. Or rather than set these two statements against each other, perhaps we could combine them:

In order to worship God and enjoy Him forever, we need to get free and stay free, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Why did Christ die to set us free if we were not meant to be free? If He wanted us to be enslaved to religion He could have stopped with the Sermon on the Mount. In the beginning, we were made in the image of God, and one major aspect of that is our freedom. God is free and we are meant to be free also. Freedom is our native environment. That is where we function best. That is where we are fully alive and fully human in all its God-given glory!

The Christian Church will realise her full potential when believers live abundant lives totally free in the presence of God - free from manipulation, expectation and control by others ... even God Himself! God never wanted to control us and He still doesn't. Why can't we see that? Why do we still run to Him like little kids and long for him to call all the shots in our life in a way that He never intended? More about that later.

Paul's letter to the Galatians has two parts: in the first part he tells us who we are in Christ and all the blessings bestowed upon us. He says we are much loved sons and daughters of God, set free for freedom's sake. Then he goes on to say, 'in the light of that fact, this is how you ought to respond.'

Now in saying that 'you are free, it's all by grace and you can't do anything to earn it or pay it back', please don't think that it doesn't matter how you act. That is not what Paul is saying at all. After emphasising our freedom in Christ, he immediately goes on to say: *"Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."* He puts the responsibility fairly upon our shoulders to protect the freedom that Christ has given us. The fact that Christ set you free on the cross doesn't mean that you just settle back and watch it all happen in your life. We live in a world where all sorts of pressures are brought to bear to rob us of that freedom and enslave us again.

In our Christian lives, there are demonic forces, religious forces, social forces and forces from within our own personalities which will undermine that freedom, and we are going to have to fight to protect it. This is true at every level of society and in every culture. These are the forces which have shaped every world system. They are spiritual as much as environmental or cultural, and they are strong and persistent ... but they are no match for the life of Christ within us. He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world, so we have nothing to fear.

So why do we give up our freedom so easily and fall for religious externals? This is speculation, but I believe the real culprit behind it lies within our own personalities. There is something strangely comforting about someone else taking responsibility for our decisions.

When you look around in the world, you will see most people are ready to give up their freedom if some 'big brother' ... or government ... or religion ... will take responsibility for the terrifying freedom we've been given as human beings. Freedom represents a lot of hard work, so it's often easier to let someone else take the risk and wear the consequences. Then we have someone to blame when things don't go as planned.

People get into a habit in Church where they don't think about what they hear preached, and don't read the Bible for themselves, or wrestle with God about deeper issues. They trust someone else to tell them what to think or believe. That is so much easier than operating in the freedom that is ours in Christ, and being led by the Holy Spirit. It does away with having to study the Word of God personally, and pray or fast to discern God's heart on issues.

Freedom is frightening for people who are used to having decisions made for them. We can see this in those who have been institutionalised for long periods of time. Criminals released from jail will often re-offend, just to get back into prison. They have become so dependent on having someone else take care of their needs and direct their time and activity, that the freedom for which they longed night and day actually frightens them straight back into bondage!

The same is true in our spiritual lives and that is why religion in all its subtle shapes and forms can be so enticing. Deep down, we are happy to let someone else take responsibility for us. People invent theologies of restriction and legalistic regulations which deny people's freedom and take away their responsibility for thinking for themselves. There must be a market for it, because hundreds of thousands of people submit themselves to those Churches.

When this is full-blown, as in some cults, even the most mundane decisions are directed by the 'Church' – style and colour of clothes, who they are allowed to have as friends, who they must marry... and of course, what translation of the Bible they must use! Sometimes the manipulation and intimidation inflicted by the leaders is horrific and it becomes very difficult to ever find freedom again. People have been separated from their families, or have had to move away because they chose to leave the group.

Deep down many of us fear relating to God naked spirit to naked spirit – as totally accepted sons and daughters in an intimate, uninhibited, no rules relationship of love. When you combine that fear with the very powerful spiritual forces behind guilt, shame and religion, you start to understand why so many people over so many years have allowed themselves to be beaten up in Church every week. There is no other explanation.

There is another manifestation of insecurity in our relationship with God, which looks respectable, but is just another display of religion. There are people who desperately seek the Lord for every little decision they make. They genuinely want to do His will, so they want confirmation before they will take any step. Often they don't get the guidance they want, because the Lord is effectively saying: *'I've set you free to make your own decisions. Whether you are right or wrong won't affect how I feel about you. Learn to operate in that freedom.'*

I am not for one moment saying we shouldn't pray about anything and everything – go right ahead, God is always happy to talk to you about anything. But if He does not give any clear insight or reason for not proceeding, you are free to do what you think is appropriate. Your moment by moment dependency on Him is not intended to hold you back like an immature child. There are many things we do not need to seek His mind on because He has already told us clearly in Bible.

There are other things which are given to us as choices and God wants us to exercise our freedom creatively and use the growing wisdom which He is releasing in as we draw near to him.

If it doesn't work, we don't blame God. He smiles lovingly at us, picks us up, dusts us off, encourages us and sets us back on the bicycle and pushes us down the hill again! That's what freedom is all about! It's scary – it's a wild ride sometimes - but it's what God ordained for us all.

It is for freedom and dignity that Christ has set us free. We can fight it or hide from it; we can deny it or run away from it – but we cannot change the fact that we are, objectively speaking, totally and radically free because of Christ. However, down through history the gospel of God's free grace has been repeatedly replaced by the bondage of religion because men and women in key places have faltered because of fear.

Too many Christian leaders are weak and dependent people. Some choose helping professions like social work and psychology to meet their own needs by being needed by others. A number of counsellors and social workers and psychologists I have met and known should never have entered that field in my opinion. They did so because of needs in them. That sounds pretty harsh ... but I believe it is true.

If you're not secure in yourself and need others to make you feel OK, prop you up, or need you, then you are absolutely vulnerable to those people. All they have to do is remove that acceptance and you're in big trouble. This has happened to many Christian leaders and it's tragic. They become controlled by other people.

It's important to reflect on the sources of your own fear. A lot of it is tied up with a threat of rejection or abandonment. Many people have had painful experiences of rejection which makes them quite vulnerable. I have had to face these fears personally over many years. Since the age of 15 I have found myself in leadership positions and places of influence over others and therefore, I have been open to this danger most of my life.

I know what this is like and if I had not let God bring me through this issue into freedom in Him, then the rejection I have experienced from those around me over the years would have bound me in such a way that I would have been utterly useless to anyone. Worse than useless, I would have been dangerous if I had remained in leadership. It is no picnic fighting the forces which try to bind us and rob us of this freedom. At times every emotion in us cries out and pushes us in the opposite direction ... but we have to respond in spirit and in truth ... not from our emotions ... if freedom is where we desire to live.

Another inner enemy of freedom is the past, or at least our attitude to the past. Your past has absolutely no power whatsoever - it is only your attitude to the past which can impact the present and the future. Don't let the enemy blind you to the truth. Someone may say: *My father abused me, therefore my life is a mess.* In Christ you have been made free, so you can't blame your father forever. You can make new choices. You can respond any way you want, so if you stay messed up, it's your choice, what was your father's fault then is not your father's fault now – you are free to choose.

Another may say: *My wife isn't interested in me anymore, therefore I started looking to other women to meet my needs.* Your partner didn't make you do anything, you have made a choice to walk away from your marriage. You are free, and with your freedom comes the full responsibility for your decisions. Someone may say: *My last Church abused me; or, My last Pastor was spiritually abusive, so that's why I'm dysfunctional in this Church.* Well, stay as long as you need to get healed, but finally, if you stay dysfunctional, that is a choice you have made, because Jesus is the One Who has set you free to choose.

Adam said: *I disobeyed you God, because the woman made me do it.*

Eve said: *I disobeyed you God, because the serpent made me do it.*

God said: *No, you were free. You made choices and real consequences follow real freedom.*

That little dialogue has been going on between us and God ever since and so many people still don't get it and still try as hard as they can to shift the responsibility for their lives to someone else. At that point they are not operating in freedom. That's why real freedom is scary – because **real freedom equals real choices**, and at the end of the day, your life is not going to be labelled: 'Social Forces'; nor 'Life's Chances'.. your life will be labelled: 'My Choices'.

You may ask: *Does that mean I no longer have an excuse for the way I am - for being broke, or depressed, or lonely or something else..?* Yes, it does! We can't alter many of the circumstances into which we are born, or which come our way, but we are in total control of our reactions to those circumstances.

When failure comes, we can let our lives stop at that point, or we can choose to embrace a new opportunity and press on. We are free to not be held captive by anything that happens to us. In Christ you are not condemned for the way your life looks, because all your good choices and all your bad choices are covered by the blood of Jesus. You are forgiven and cleansed for all time. What a tragic shame it is if you allow fear or failure to rule the way you live. Failure is not the worst thing that can happen to you, the worst thing is to let yourself be imprisoned by fear of any kind and not do anything – not take any chances, never make any radical choices. That is to miss out on life itself!

When you are acting under compulsion of public opinion or external pressure to conform to man-made standards, rules or expectations, you are not free. You have alienated yourself from Christ, and fallen away from the experience of the empowering presence of God. When this happens, you shouldn't fall on the floor in despair, you just need to change your mind, repent of religion and go back and allow God to bathe you in His freedom again.

Let the Spirit of God set you free from the bondage of the fear of freedom – the fear of making wrong choices – the fear of forgiving somebody that's hurt you and may hurt you again. These fears and many more keep us from walking and ministering in the freedom that Jesus bought for each of us with His life's blood.

Paul goes on to explain what true freedom is. He was accused of being soft on sin, of encouraging lawlessness by emphasising the grace of God, so he wrote in Galatians 5:13-15:

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."

Paul defines freedom. He says you know when you're finally free in Christ when you are free to serve others. Freedom isn't lying in bed all day doing nothing and filling your life with self-indulgence. You can love and serve one another because you have first been loved by God. God's amazing grace has so overwhelmed you that it flows out into those around you. So you don't have to trade or barter to get acceptance from anyone else ever again. You can just give them your love and acceptance the way God does, whether you receive any back or not. That is the ultimate test of true freedom. That is setting others free as you have been.

True freedom is not freedom *to* sin – it is freedom *from* sin. It is finally defined in serving one another in love. When nothing and no one can keep you from loving others, then you are walking in the freedom that is yours in Christ. You are walking in the Spirit because *"...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."* (2 Corinthians 3:17)

It is often observed that people set free from some bondage over their lives will return to it. Many people have a concept of freedom and consider it to be one of the basic human rights, but don't really know how to live in that freedom every day.

God has set a very high value on human freedom – Jesus gave His life to purchase it for us. So Paul took it very seriously when the Church gave its freedom away. There are many reasons why we return to the confines of religious life, but they are all rooted in one thing – we don't trust God to keep us and work in us and through us. We keep returning to our own efforts to find security.

Our security, our significance, our purpose and our destiny are all found in Christ. That is the truth which will set us gloriously and permanently free - the freedom for which Christ has set us free.

How then shall we live?

In freedom!

By His grace – for His glory!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. God made us free to be authentically who we were created to be.

In order to worship God and enjoy Him forever, we need to get free and stay free, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Real freedom = real choices

There are many reasons why we return to the confines of religious life, but they are all rooted in one thing – we don't trust God to keep us and work in us and through us. We keep returning to our own efforts to find security.