



Sermon Growth Guide

October 2, 2022

Freely Bound



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Freedom - Freely Bound

Galatians 4:8-20

Key Verse: Galatians 4:9

“But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”

Big Idea: Jesus freed us from idolatry so that we might be freely bound to Him.

Foundations

“Freely bound.” Is this an oxymoron among oxymorons? Who in their right mind would want to be bound *freely* to anything? After all, isn't real freedom about being set free from anything that would bind us anyway? This is not the case as we discover what it is to be bound to *Jesus*.

Idolatry could be considered as the practice of being bound to things that ultimately enslave us into captivity. In ancient times, idol worship was prevalent. The Galatians would have worshiped local gods themselves prior to the gospel arriving, offering sacrifices to gain better circumstances. However, Paul warns that these “weak and miserable forces” (v.9), while promising power if we bind ourselves to them, only produce misery in the end.

Nevertheless, being bound to Jesus sets us free! Jesus sets us *free to work*, not as an attempt to find our own justification, but as a free response to his amazing love. Jesus sets us *free to love*, not out of idolizing ourselves, but in view of God's love we properly love others. Jesus sets us *free to serve*, as we surrender our will and desires to his, centralizing His lordship as the source of power in service.

In the end, Jesus became bound by becoming human, freely binding Himself to the cross, that you and I might forever be freely bound to Him.

Understanding God's Word

What is this passage saying? What does it seem that Paul is most concerned about in this passage?

What might you say is the tone of this passage?

Applying God's Word

How does a good thing become an idol? What might you say is one thing you obsess over; something you habitually or inadvertently treasure more than God?

Witnessing God's Word

Take one of the three applications from Tim's sermon this week (free to work, free to love and free to serve) and consider one way that the Lord might be inviting you to apply it personally.

To what are you freely bound? What have you tied yourself to? I think we are not even fully aware of our binding commitments sometimes. You know when you download an app or it gets updated and you click, "I Agree" to the new terms and conditions. Did you read all that? There's a 48-page document behind that little button! What are your commitments? We are talking about **Freedom** this fall. Galatians is telling us we are committed and bound to the wrong things in our quest for freedom. You might think that keeping all your options open is freedom. You might think that being able to choose whatever you want to do at all times is freedom. Actually, you are bound. There is no such thing as total non-commitment, and healthy commitments can actually render freedom. You are tied to the things you love. You do worship something. There is only one thing, one person, to worship and commit yourself to, and that worship and that commitment will make you totally free. That's Jesus.

At this point in the letter, Paul is expressing frustration. Having been set free, why are you returning to slavery? "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 turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?" (Galatians 4:8-9) Have you ever seen an animal rescued by a team of veterinarians who open the cage to set it free into the wild only to have the animal crawl back into the cage and cower in the back? They have to poke the thing to get it out of there! You're free! Off you go! But it crawls back into comfortable captivity. That can be us.

The Galatians were set free. From what? Well, originally, from pagan totemism and idolatry. Literal idols. We just got back from the first official visit to Cairo First Pres has been able

to pull off in a few years. Greg Zaloom and I were able to piggy-back on a trip with TOLI (Touch of Love International) who my wife works for. It was fantastic to get time with our sister church, Heliopolis Evangelical Church. They are doing well. Christianity has opened up in Egypt. They are planting churches, holding outreach camps for kids, including Muslims, and seeing a lot of conversions. They have struggles too. Teens are facing the same hard challenges sticking with their faith that ours face. We visited an area called Garbage Village where people sort garbage to find recyclables and other resources out of the city's trash. Christians are primarily the ones doing this job for Cairo and they live among piles and piles of garbage. We support a ministry there called Center of Love that reaches out to kids with special needs. When the love of Christ pours out on the most needful, amazing things happen. People who see themselves as garbage among garbage find their worth again in the Lord.

Anyway, as you know Egypt is full of images of ancient gods. Literal idols. Literal statues and monuments reflecting millennia of worshipping false gods. Gods who never delivered. Gods who never opened their mouths. Gods who never did anything for you no matter how much you did for them. The Egyptian church has been set free. The Galatians would have worshiped local gods. They offered sacrifices on appointed days hoping to see a better harvest, a year of health, a better situation. But we all know leaving grain at the feet of a statue is not going to alter the weather patterns, don't we? When the Galatians met Christ, they were set free from superstition and sacrifice to so-called gods who were no gods at all.

"But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be



enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!" (Galatians 4:9-10)

Were the Galatian Christians taking up worship of old idols again? Maybe. But I think it's something else. I think it's that they were falling back into the old patterns, the old habits, only now, instead of seeking Marduk or Osiris or Ahura Mazda, they were acting like they can garner God's good favor by performing religious works for him. You can make an idol out of a good thing, you know. You can even make an idol out of true religion.

Idolatry promises power. Give me a sacrifice and I will make you powerful. Paul points out interestingly that he came to them in weakness. The Gospel came to them in weakness. "As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you." (Galatians 4:13) Nothing in Paul's message said let me show you the sacrifices and incantations to gain power. Nothing in him said, try this and you will find yourself healthy and wealthy. Paul was weak before them. They served him in his weakness. His eyes were sick. We don't know what it was exactly, but it was incapacitating. It was Paul's weakness that brought them together. People are impressed by your strengths, but they relate to you through your weaknesses. The gospel isn't a pattern of power gain, but they fell back into patterns of pleasing "gods" to gain success. Can you see that? Only this time, it's Jahweh they are trying to please. They were making an idol, unthinkingly, of doing the Jewish practices of the law. And the thing with idols is that you love them, and you hate anybody who points them out or pokes at them or threatens to take them away. The Galatians would have plucked out their own eyes to help Paul with his, he says, but now, "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16) Truth can make enemies sometimes.

So, we need to talk about idolatry. Idolatry is not some archaic idea locked up in a museum. It's a pattern of life, a way of living. It sacrifices to what it values most expecting reward in return, but the object of worship cannot return what it promises so idolatry gives and gives and sacrifices and sacrifices in an endless, baseless hope that the happiness will someday break through. Even as believers we have a tendency toward idolatry. Calvin said the human mind is a factory for idols. Your idol is whatever takes up the most space in mind and spirit; what you think about last at night and first in the morning. An idol promises deliverance but delivers bondage. What do you worship? Today is a day for casting down idols.

David Foster Wallace delivered a commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005 that became famous. As a non-believer, he said, "...there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." So, he said, choose carefully because most things you worship will enslave you. Worship money and you'll never have enough. Worship success and you will never be sure you have attained it. Worship intellect and you will never feel smart enough; you will walk into every room waiting to be exposed as a fraud. Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid. Worship your body and beauty and physical pleasure, and time will slowly and steadily pull the rug out from under you until everything collapses. So, Wallace said, even though he didn't believe in God he thought the best thing to do was to worship God, "pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive."

What Wallace didn't mention is that religion can be just as alluring. Worship religion and you will feel spiritually superior for just a minute, but then you will become a prisoner of moralistic self-righteousness. I think you need to be following the series and doing a little



of your own study of Galatians to make sense of all that. They had received salvation as a free gift but were tempted to use religious behavior as a basis for winning God's favor. As if they could be saved on the basis of their works, not on the basis of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Now, having been saved, we wish to order our lives around Jesus. We wish to honor Jesus. We wish to freely bind ourselves to him and follow him as not only the Savior of our eternal souls but as the Lord of our daily lives. Yes. But it is so easy to slip back into believing that God only loves us when we are good, that God only saves us because we are noble, that God only responds to us when we are perfectly obedient. We slip into a new idolatry. That's tricky, isn't it? We slip into an idolatry of religion. Even Christian religion. Jesus wants us free. If we are bound to him, he wants us freely bound.

Sadly, we freely bind ourselves to all kinds of idolatries, not Egyptian gods or ancient Galatian deities but idols nonetheless. Whatever takes the primary place in your life is what you worship. Don't be freely bound to anything less than God. Anything other than Jesus and you will find yourself in chains. Jesus. This is the power of Jesus. To know him is to love him. To trust him is to be confident. To bend the knee and serve only him is to finally be free. Enslaving yourself to Jesus sets you free.

Let me offer three quick applications and we will go to the table of World Communion. Jesus sets you free to work, free to love, and free to serve. **(1) Free to work.** When work is an idol, it consumes you. It becomes everything to you. Jesus frees you to do your work, not as a desperate attempt to justify yourself but as a free response to his love. You can do your work in joy and with balance, as an opportunity to use the gifts God has given you to glorify him and love your neighbor

and perhaps make the world a little bit better. You work faithfully and in peace, leaving the results to Jesus. Free. **(2) Free to love.** When love is an idol, love becomes a transaction, quid pro quo, I give you this, I expect this in return. If you are settled on Christ and freely bound to Jesus alone as your Savior, you rest in the fullness of his love. You can love others freely, not out of need, or transaction or desperation. You are free to love. **(3) Free to serve.** Power can be an idol. Like money, power is a helpful servant but a terrible master. When you are addicted to power, every relationship is an opportunity to gain more. Last week in Garbage Village where the ministry Abigail serves operates, we were there to serve these precious people in Christ's love. They had nothing they could give to us in return. My time spent with them was not going to move me toward the center of power. But in another way, it did. I saw the power of the Lord. If Jesus is your center of power, you are free to serve the poor, to love the powerless, to lift the orphan and the widow. Many of you stepped out in service yesterday for City Serve! The lower you got, I suspect, the more of the power of the love of Jesus you felt.

We come to a table now which none of us have earned, to a meal none of us has paid for, to a community none of us has worked our way into, but only by the grace of Jesus Christ. Jesus stepped down from heaven and became bound, to human flesh, to human frailty, and to human evil and rage and animosity—he freely bound himself to all these things. He freely bound himself to the cross. So that you and I could have a better freedom. Better than slipping back into foolish bondage to false gods! Free. Truly free. We freely come and sit and receive. Us, and every believer. We come to the table of World Communion as one.

