

The Sum of Christianity: Freedom

Rich Nathan
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The Book of Galatians Series
Galatians 5:1-18

This evening [morning] we are going to talk about freedom. Four times in the passage that we are going to look at, the apostle Paul uses the word “freedom.” He declares in Gal. 5:1, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” And then down in verse 13, the apostle Paul says, “You my brothers [sisters] were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature.”

Freedom – since the 1960’s freedom has been the political slogan, the watchword, and the battle cry of virtually every progressive group around the world. In the 1960’s it was under the banner of freedom that Third World countries in Africa and Asia, South American liberated themselves from the Imperialists, the Colonialists. I still remember maps in grade school with the Belgian Congo on them and Rhodesia and French Guyana. One by one, as people around the world fought for national self-determination, liberation from foreign powers; the names of countries began to change. There was a wind blowing in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s that seemed to know no racial bounds, no ethnic bounds, and no tribal bounds. There was a wind of freedom. And everyone who tried to stop the wind got swept away in a whirlwind. Even Americans, the world’s super power, discovered that in Viet Nam. We could not hold back this passion on the part of a group of people to be free from foreign domination.

Freedom was also the slogan, the driving passion, of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s as hundreds, hundreds of thousands, and then millions of people around America declared, “We will no longer have our futures curtailed by racial discrimination. We want to the freedom to determine where we live and where our kids go to school and what job we are able to have and who we can marry and where we can be buried determined in Martin Luther King’s famous words, ‘Not by the color of our skin, but by the content of our characters.’”

Freedom. The Civil Rights Movement was all about the ability of a person to live free from limits imposed on you because of skin color, because of where you happened to be born, because of the continent that your ancestors came from. Freedom was so much the heart of the Civil Rights Movement that on Martin Luther King’s grave stone is engraved his famous saying, “Free at last, free at last – thank God Almighty, I am free at last.”

Freedom was the battle cry of Women’s Liberation. Thousands and then millions of women rebelled against societally appointed roles that denied women any options at all or any choice. Millions of women said, “What if I want to do something in addition to or other than stay at home and be a mom or a wife? And if I go to work, will I have the freedom to advance according to my ability or will there is an artificial ceiling designed to keep women in their proper place? And when I interact with men in the workplace, can I be free from sexual harassment, from being groped and grabbed and being the subject of lewd remarks. Or must I constantly endure profanity and unwanted advances from the opposite sex?”

And, of course, as in everything there are people who constantly push the edge. There were some advocates of freedom that say, "Women will only be free when they are freed from the constraints of their physiology. We are only going to see real freedom when men begin to breast feed and when men have to endure nine months of pregnancy and nausea, bloating and swollen ankles and when we don't have to bear children anymore. When the other sex takes that burden on, then we will be free."

Freedom didn't stay within the banks of national emancipation or racial integration, or women's liberation. In the 1960's, those who advocated freedom of sexual expression also picked up freedom. Why do we have to wait until we get married to have sex? Why can't there be sexual freedom to have sex whenever and with whomever you want. Why can't you live together before you get married and try things out for a while to see if you are sexually compatible? It was said back then, "You don't buy a car until you test drive it. Why make a commitment as big as marriage until you test drive?"

And why is the expression of sexuality confined to the other gender? What about freedom to express one's sexuality with the same gender? And so beginning in the 1970's we had the origins of the gay liberation movement and the first Gay Rights parades.

And then this passion for freedom spilled over into what became known as Reproductive Freedom – the freedom to abort unwanted children.

Biblical Christians, thoughtful Christians, sensitive Christians soon found themselves saying "yes" to some of these movements. And some of these things expressed the very heart of God and God's commitment to justice and his passion for human liberation. Thoughtful Christians also said, "No" and found themselves in opposition to other expressions of liberation and freedom. Thoughtful Christians began to say that some of these things are destructive to the human condition and actually bring about increased bondage and increased slavery. Some of these things are the very opposite of the Christian's goal of love.

It is because Christians, biblical Christians, thoughtful Christians, sensitive Christians, found themselves saying no to certain demands for freedom; it is because biblical, thoughtful, sensitive Christians found themselves in the opposition to certain liberation movements that many people in America would be shocked to discover that freedom is a profoundly Christian word and that the Christian message to the world can be summarized in this one word: Freedom. Christians are not Johnny-Come-Latelys jumping on the end of the bandwagon of the liberation movements that have been going on for 40 years. We Christians are not trying to baptize with some thin religious veneer the desire for freedom that we see springing up all around us. It would be closer to the truth to say that the culture has stolen the birthright of Christianity, this message of freedom, and that we Christians must steal this word freedom back and offer it a clear, ringing, articulate expression of what Christianity is all about.

Here is what we are looking at today—"The Sum of Christianity: Freedom."

The apostle Paul in Galatians 5 hits what you might call the highest note in the letter. It is almost a proclamation shouted from the mountaintops. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. This is what the letter to the Galatians is all about. It is the celebration of Christian freedom. Freedom is a great Christian word. In fact, it is a word that could easily be used as a substitute for the word "salvation." Many people today don't

understand what you mean when you say, “Jesus saves.” Over the top of over passes in America and scrawled on restroom walls, painted on subways in New York, spray painted on the sides of buildings is the phrase, “Jesus Saves.” Most folks haven’t a clue as to what that means. They are not connected to that phrase at all.

We could easily translate the phrase “Jesus Saves” into “Jesus Sets Us Free”. Jesus liberates us from everything that makes us slaves, from every power that dominates us and keeps us under. If you want to understand what salvation is all about in both the New Testament and the Old Testament just focus on this one word – freedom. Think about this with me. What is the picture of salvation in the Old Testament? When God wanted to provide a physical picture of what it meant that he came to save people, what was the picture? What was the overriding picture in the Old Testament of God’s saving people? The Old Testament picture of salvation was God coming and liberating, setting the slave people Israel free from bondage in Egypt. See, God cares about slavery. And so he called a man named Moses at the burning bush and said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of the slave drivers and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The cry of the Israelites has reached me and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt.”

What is the Old Testament expression of salvation? It is God seeing the misery and hearing the cries and feeling the oppression of his people Israel and determining to liberate Israel from Egyptian slavery. It’s all about freedom.

And why did Jesus Christ come into the world? Here is what Jesus said in Lk 4. Here is his mission. This was sort of his inaugural address in his hometown of Nazareth as Jesus lays out what his administration is going to be about. “Now that I have come to be the leader of God’s people, here is what I plan to do. The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. [Listen to this. Listen to this.] He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” His ministry, he said, was designed to be a releasing ministry, a liberating ministry, and a ministry in which people were set free.

And Jesus understood that it was only coming to him that people really could experience the freedom that they yearned for. In John. 8:34, Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

Freedom is a uniquely Christian word. That is what salvation means. That is what redemption means. It means to be purchased out of slavery by the payment of a price. When Jesus died on the cross, his blood was the price paid to give us freedom.

You say, “Rich, what is it that we need to be freed from?”

The Bible is real clear that people live under powers and forces that are too strong for them, that oppress them, that dominate them. And God in his mercy sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to release us, to free us from powers that we cannot free ourselves from. It is for freedom that Christ has set you free.

Christianity is all about freedom. Being liberated from the things that oppress us. At the beginning of Galatians the apostle Paul says that Christ came to deliver us

(Galatians 1:4) to rescue us from the powers of the present evil age. Colossians 2 he says, "He disarmed the principalities and powers, triumphing over them." Back in the ancient world people lived under bondage to the powers of magic and astrology, the stars, fears of curses, the occult. The extraordinary thing in America in the 90's is that people are turning back to all of the powers that Christianity had delivered them from. It is as if right now in our openness to the New Age Movement and the Occult and to witchcraft and paganism, that folks are saying, "I want to again become a slave to that which my ancestors were delivered from by the power of Christianity." Christ came to set us free from the powers.

Christ came to set us free from the oppression of guilt and fear. Think about just one of Jesus' statements. In Matthew. 6 Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of it's own. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for today."

Just meditate on that saying for just a moment. You know, people live in incredible bondage to two days every week that create oppression and fear and anxiety. Jesus in one little statement says that there are two days that I have come to set you free from. Two days from every week that I want to liberate you from. I want to liberate you from yesterday and I want to liberate you from tomorrow. Because of Jesus you can be set free from yesterday, from all the mistakes you made, from all the ways you blew it, from all the things, attitudes, faults, aches and pains. Jesus came to set you free from the guilt of yesterday so that you could nail yesterday to the cross. God says I am not looking at your yesterday. I am just looking at Jesus, so you stop looking at yesterday. Jesus came to liberate us from our yesterdays so that we don't have to be bitter about what people have done to us or regret what we have done and our missed opportunities and what we should have done. Jesus liberates us from yesterday.

And he sets us free from tomorrow. So many of us live in dread and anxiety regarding what tomorrow will bring. There will be trouble ahead. I don't know if I will be able to perform tomorrow. I don't know if I can keep this faith going tomorrow. I don't know if I am going to be able to walk in a liberated way tomorrow. The wonderful thing about Jesus is that he says "I am setting you free to live now. Just live today. I will provide for you tomorrow that day's portion. But today, just live in me. You can do it today. You can hang in your marriage today. You can love in this moment. You can choose purity right now."

Let me ask you some personal questions. Have you let go of yesterday, of all your yesterdays? Have you not just said that's water under the bridge but brought the guilt of yesterday to the cross. Are you free from yesterday? Are you free from tomorrow? Christ only meets us today!

Jesus sets us free from the powers. Jesus sets us free from yesterday and tomorrow. Jesus sets us free from sin. From all the liberations that I talked about at the outset – the liberation politically, the liberation economically, the liberation vocationally, Jesus offers the deepest kind of freedom that any man or woman can experience. The real liberation of your will so that you can be free to choose not to do something that you are presently compelled to do. There is no greater slavery than the slavery of one's will. When you suddenly discover that you cannot do something.

There is nothing more oppressive than the loss of choice, where you find that you must do something and you are living under an eternal must – a compulsion, an

obsession, what we call in the 90's an addiction and what the Bible called the power of sin. You know, you have watched this, haven't you?

Take a guy named Bill. He was a strict churchgoer growing up. He went through catechism and joined the church. He attended every Sunday. In his late teens Bill begins to enjoy an occasional beer with his friends. He goes off to college and gets married. He buys a house and fathers a child. Then he experiences some job pressure and begins to develop a little drinking problem. And then a serious drinking problem. Eventually his drinking breaks up his marriage and alienates him from his family. He shows up late for work with liquor on his breath. He loses his job and finds that he cannot stop drinking. He has lost the power to choose. Every occasion – when he is tired, when he is depressed, when he is alone, when he is anxious, when he is frustrated – every occasion becomes an occasion for Bill to drink. We say, “Oh, look at Bill. What a mess, just another statistic and a guy to avoid, just hope he doesn't drive near me when he is drunk. I hope that he is not the engineer on the train coming by my house. I hope that my kids are not in the front yard when Bill drives by. Thank God, I am not like Bill,” you say.

Do you know what the Bible says? “Liar!” Virtually everyone is like Bill. At the core of your being there is some area where you find that you cannot do something. Like a fly caught in a spider web, you are trapped. When you lift one leg you get caught in another strand of the web. Continually hooked by a relationship. Continually drawn back to an eating problem. Continually trapped by your own sexuality and practices or your raging anger, or sabotaging fear, or fitness obsession or hypochondria, or workaholism.

The good news of Christianity is that Jesus came to liberate a person from that which oppresses the most – the bondage of the will. In fact, my entire message next week is going to be about that as Paul continues with this theme of liberation.

In this text, Paul returns again to the theme of Jesus' liberation of us from the power of legalism. He says, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Stand firm, he says. This is Paul's way of communicating that in order to live free of legalism, you are going to have to fight. It is a fight to live in freedom. Freedom is a gift that Jesus gives, but it is a fight to hold on to it. It is constantly being wrestled out of our hands. I think one of the things that Christians need to be told at the beginning of their Christian life is that you are entering a fight. Have you noticed that being a Christian is not just a picnic at the park? It's a fight sometimes.

You have heard the message of grace that God will embrace you and accept you as a free gift solely because of what his Son, Jesus, did. It is all grace. It is all a gift. You don't have to perform. God can't accept you anymore than he does right now. But it is going to be fight for you to hold that truth front and center in your mind because over and over again you are going to be tempted to believe that the reason why you are doing well and God is blessing you is because of your performance. You are going to be tempted to link the favor of God with what you did or didn't do. You are going to be tempted to believe that because you blew it, God's grace won't cover that failure. It's a fight to live in grace. It's a fight to overthrow all the legalism in your life.

Have you ever been caught off guard, really surprised by the fact that Christianity and this message of freedom from legalism and grace is a fight for you to hold onto? I

have often described the Christian expectation of life as being now that we are saved, we are put on the playing field and we just get to run up and down the field, handing off the ball, running, throwing the ball, catching it. Back and forth, up and down the field. All of a sudden, we find ourselves body slammed to the ground. We get turf in our mouths. Someone is kicking the ball loose. We are doubled over in pain and say, "What is going on?" And then we hear this little message, "There is another team on the field. You are not playing alone. There is opposition." We say, "What? I thought that once I got the message I am just going to run free."

Paul says, "Stand firm." It is a fight to hang onto freedom. You have to fight with all your might. He goes on to say, "Don't let yourself be burdened again." You can circle that word again. "...By a yoke of slavery." You will remember that the Galatians came out from under one yoke. A yoke is a symbol of a heavy burden. They came out from under the yoke of paganism, the yoke of bondage to the powers to magic, to the occult. He says, "Don't come back under another new yoke, the yoke of legalism and remember behind legalism we receive more power. Of trying to perform for God by following the Mosaic Law, the commandments with all of their particulars."

Why is legalism earning favor with God? Because for one thing, it appeals to our pride. I mean there is something in all of us that wants to say, "What I am doing really has really impressed God. My success is due to me. I'm a self-made man or woman." Christianity tells us that you can't earn anything from God. You have to humble yourself and receive salvation on your knees as a gift. That freedom/salvation is given only to those who renounce what they have done and receive what Christ has done. But our pride is always tempted to get up from our knees and try to pay a little bit of our dinner bill. To try to make up a little bit for our sin. To show God that we really are sincere. To make promises and vows.

Legalism is such a fight for us because it gives us a ground of comparison. Instead of all of us being down on our knees with Bill the alcoholic and Jane the prostitute and Doug the drug abuser – all of us having our wills bound and praying to have them liberated, there is a part of us that wants to say, "NO, I am better than them. I am not like them." We have to fight those feelings, those judgements of others in which we stack ourselves up and say, "I am a better person."

You say, "But, Rich, I really am better than drug addicts and alcoholics."

From what vantage point? Think about it this way? From the vantagepoint of the ground, Mt. Everest is majorly bigger than the hills at Sharon Woods, just north of here. From the vantage point of the ground there seems to be all of this disparity in height. But look at planet Earth from the perspective of the next galaxy. From the perspective 4 billion light years away, and there is not a whole lot of difference between Mt. Everest and an anthill.

From the perspective of God who is infinitely above us every one of us is pretty much the same. Legalism is appealing and seductive because it is ultimately so easy. Tell me how many meetings a week I need to go to. Tell me exactly how long I need to pray. Tell me how short I need to cut my hair. Tell me what TV shows I can and cannot watch. Tell me what sort of jewelry I can wear or not wear, or what I can pierce and not pierce on my body.

But you start focusing on what Christianity focuses on – the liberation of the will, the eternal freedom, the place where people can't see whether I really love from the heart –

you start focusing on me having a good loving marriage, serving my wife or being humble or being open to correction, you start focusing on my heart and attitudes and, wow, that is tough stuff. It is a fight to be free from legalism.

Paul says that there is a big cost if you are not free. There are three costs actually. He says, "Mark my words. If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value at all to you. Again, I declare that every man who lets himself be circumcised is obligated to obey the whole law. You who were trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ. You have fallen away from grace."

Here is the argument. He is saying that Christianity is all about freedom. Christ has set you free and you need to stand in that freedom and fight for that freedom. Don't let any kind of little wedge get in that separates you from that freedom for even a moment. And that is what the whole problem he has with circumcision is all about. The false teachers were coming into the Galatian churches saying that these Gentile converts needed to be circumcised to enter the full inheritance of Jesus. These Gentiles converts needed to first become Jews.

You say, "Circumcision, well it might be painful, but it is pretty trivial. It is just a surgical operation. Why is Paul saying that it is such an enormous thing?"

Because you are cut off from Christ if you do it -- that you lose grace. That Christ won't be of any value to you. Paul understands that circumcision is not just a physical operation. Circumcision is a whole other religion. It represents trying to earn your way to God by obeying the law. And for Paul, there were two very different kinds of religion. Either you are accepted by God because you obey God's commands or you are accepted by God because you have placed your faith in Christ. Either you receive Christ by acknowledging that you can't save yourself, or you try and obey all the rules and claim you can save yourself. Paul is saying that you can't have it both ways. You either have a religion of law or you have a religion of grace. You either have Christ or you have circumcision. Either Christ alone is enough or he isn't enough. Paul doesn't permit any fudging, no hedging. NO compromise. No mix.

But you try to add anything to Jesus; you lose Jesus in the bargain. You either value Christ supremely or you don't value him at all.

And then he goes on to say that the way of escape from legalism is faith. "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."

See, here's the deal. Remember that bondage that I was talking about before where you find yourself stuck? Caught up in a habit so that you cannot do something? How do you get your will liberated? There are two alternatives that Paul says throughout this letter. There is the alternative of legalism, of saying; "I am going to pull myself from that fly paper by the sheer power of my will. I am going to work my way off this thing" or "I am going to exercise faith." Faith means I surrender to God. I come to God saying, "MY will power and my attempts to pull my legs free have never worked. I now surrender myself to you and my predicament to you, acknowledging to you that I am helpless and hopeless. And I give you permission, God; to do whatever you need to do in my life to liberate my will. If you must bring into my life pain, then let it be pain. If you must bring into my life, truth then let it be truth. If you must confront me to shrink me down to size, then allow that to occur. If I must humble myself to join a group that is

devoted to dealing with this issue, then God, I am willing to do even that. But whatever it takes, Lord, I wait for you. I don't work for you. I wait for you." See faith is about waiting for God to speak. Waiting for God to act. Waiting not working; waiting and not us producing something.

Let me ask you a personal question. Have you ever said to God in the area that you are stuck, "Lord, whatever it takes. Whatever you need to do, I give you permission to do." As you look for righteousness that is not going to come from inside of you, but as the apostle Paul says, "You wait through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope" a righteousness, a cleanness that is outside of you.

Well, it is a fight to get free. And the fight is a fight of faith. It is a fight of surrendering to God, of not working our way to God. But I will tell you the apostle Paul says what I call foes of freedom. In verse 7 the apostle Paul says, "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?" You know, Paul loves these athletic metaphors. He loves to talk about boxing and running because Paul was a real man. And in the ancient world people didn't run around a track or an oval. What they did do was run out to a post way out in a field. They would run out to it, touch it and then run back. Sometimes their opponents would cheat and cut in on them and hinder them from running the race well. The apostle Paul says that there is always going to be people who try to bring you back under bondage to law. There are lots and lots of teachers out there who communicate the message that says, "Look to yourself. If you would just get it together then God would be favorable to you. God is waiting for his church to get itself together. If you guys would just get your act together then God will be able to use you. See grace says God uses broken people; messed up people. God is not waiting for you to get it together totally in all areas before he can use you. That's legalism. Performance. Get real religious – not righteous, but religious." Start judging God's acceptance of people based on how much of the Bible they know. Or how long they fasted or whether they smoke or not.

And all of this legalism does not come from God. Verse 8 says "The kind of persuasion doesn't come from the one who calls you." The effect of the legalistic teacher who adds rules that God never intended, the effect is to bring the whole church into bondage. A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. False teachers can corrupt huge groups of people. So many folks are leavened by legalistic churches and it takes them years to escape. Why? Because false teaching can unsettle people. It confuses. He says, "the one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be." Paul sees constant warfare, constant struggle between living in freedom, living with grace, and living on the treadmill.

He says, "Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision [verse 11], why am I still being persecuted?" Apparently, some of the Galatian false teachers were saying, "Paul, when he is not around here he will tell people that it is okay to be circumcised. When he is back in Judea among Jews he talks out of the other side of his mouth. But when he comes here he gives you only half a message. He just wants to be popular. He knows you Gentiles will never allow yourselves to be circumcised, so he changes the message to suit the audience."

Paul says, "Well, why am I persecuted then? There is a continual warfare between my message and the message of the legalists."

Finally, as we consider this message of freedom and the fact that freedom is not just a secular word, some humanistic thing that came from the 60's, just a political deal, freedom is a Christian word. Paul says there are ways for you to maximize your freedom. I have told you one way, faith. But let me give you some other secrets the apostle Paul says. Freedom can be shrunk or freedom can be maximized.

Here is a little secret for you. There is an awesome paradox in human freedom and it goes this way. The person, who wants to be most free in their will, where it really counts, must live within the limits that God has set. Limits like marriage and his word. Let me say it again. The person who wants to be most free in their will, in the inner person, so that you are free to choose, where it really counts, must live within the limits that God has set. In modern America the notion that freedom and limits are connected to each other is almost nonsense. We say freedom means living without limits. We want as human beings the kind of freedom that only God has. The Bible says in Psalms 115 God is in heaven and he is free to do whatever he pleases. WE want to be like that. The problem is that whenever we try to do whatever we please, we find ourselves getting addicted. And the sphere of our freedom shrinking and shrinking. We cannot not do something. We keep reaching out for freedom and we get hooked. Freedom involves living within the limits that God has set on us.

Let me give you a few illustrations so that you understand what I mean by being free by living within God's assigned limits because this is the way to maximize freedom so that you get the most freedom inside. Picture a fish in a fishbowl. He is in this little fishbowl. It is only about 9" in diameter. He is swimming around and around. He says, "Man, I want to be free. This little bowl that I am in is so confining. I want to experience life. I want to paint. I want to draw. I want to create. I want to travel and find myself." And so in a titanic effort, he lifts himself out of the bowl and throws himself up in the air and lands on the carpet. Freed from the limits of the water. And now lying on the carpet, he realizes that he is not free at all. He is going to die.

See, every time we break free of limits that God has set for our good, we find ourselves in greater bondage. Did you ever see that scene in the Fugitive where the train goes off the rails? And it is racing down the hillside after Harrison Ford. It is an incredible scene. It looks like the locomotive is going to jump through the screen into your seat and drive you into the back of the movie theater. Would you say the train is most free when it is off the rails or when it is running on the rails? Whenever we jump the rails, you know disaster and destruction is about to happen.

Let me give you another picture. Remember those space walks the astronauts used to engage in? They open the hatch of the ship as they are orbiting the earth. They are tethered to the space ship and there is oxygen pumped through a line. They are walking in space. We used to see those funny pictures beamed back to earth – this guy in a space suit just walking around. What if one of the astronauts said, "Man, this suit is so confining. This oxygen line that tethers me back to the mother ship is so constraining. I have to get free." He rips the suit off and disconnects the line.

This is the notion that people in America do not understand, that there is no such thing as ultimate, God-like freedom, freedom from all restraints. That freedom is maximized when we live within the limits that God has created for us, that a fish is most free when it is in the water, that a train is most free when it runs on the rails. That the astronaut is most free when he is tied to the mother ship by an oxygen line. And we are

most free when we submit ourselves to the limits that God has made for us. That is how we maximize freedom.

So here are Paul's three steps to maximizing freedom. First of all, you maximize freedom when you do not indulge yourself. "You my brothers [sisters] were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature." Self-indulgence always leads to more bondage. Freedom is not doing whatever you feel like doing whenever you feel like doing it. You maximize freedom when you do what God wants you to do when God wants you to do it. This idea of indulging, literally in the Greek it means to serve as a base of operations for a military campaign. In the Gulf War Saudi Arabia was our base of operations from where we attacked into Kuwait and Iraq. And sin can find in you a base of operations. Paul is saying not to open yourself up to the enemy's base of operations by indulging your flesh. Don't allow the thin edge of the wedge of some sin, where you walk around with just a little bit of fantasy inside – not doing a lot, but you are giving a base of operations. Don't indulge that. Don't give a foothold in your life. Do you want to maximize your freedom? Then fight for freedom on every front. Don't give in on any way for a second. If alcohol is a problem, then instead of taking a little sip, walking by the bar, driving near the tavern, hanging out with those old friends, you don't give it any room, any indulgence for even a moment. Don't walk down the candy aisle or have a bag of chocolate in your desk drawer or hidden in the cupboard or in the boot in your closet. No base of operations. Stay away from the mall. Tear up the credit cards. Put the TV in the closet. Freedom comes not by self indulgence, but self-denial.

Freedom is maximized when you serve your neighbor. "Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love." I really love that. Paul is saying that again over against what modern America would say that freedom is designed to meet my needs. Freedom is about me. Paul says that you find the most freedom when you are the most other centered. Just as Jesus said, "Those who want to find their life, have to lose it" Paul is saying, "Those who want to be free have to learn how to serve other people."

If you find that you are stuck, that you feel trapped, one of the ways to maximize freedom is to become other centered. Start serving. Take an hour or two a week apart from your particular problem and just serve. Look in the bulletin each week. There is a list of places you can serve. I will tell you that will be freedom for you.

You are stuck in depression? You are stuck in bitterness? You are stuck wondering, can I move forward in God? If you were to take two hours a week and come into the church and do something, God will expand your scope of freedom. The most joyful people are not the most selfish people. Self is a burden. Self is a weight. Self drags you down. The most joyful people, the most radiant people are the people who serve others.

And freedom is maximized when you fulfill God's law. The entire law is summed up in this single command, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' We don't live under the law trying to obey the law trying to prove something to God. But we yield ourselves in love and we yield ourselves to the Holy Spirit and we allow the Holy Spirit to pick up parts of God's Word to impress them on our lives. And more and more God's intention for us is fulfilled. Freedom means being and doing what God has intended you to be and do.

God has a purpose for you, a plan that he wants to fulfill in your life. Freedom means that you yield to that. God fulfills his loving purpose in your life.

Today, I want to offer you freedom. The kind of freedom that some of you have never tasted. The freedom of being saved, set free by Jesus Christ. That is what it means to be saved – set free. Free from the powers. Free from the law. Free from yesterday and tomorrow. Free from sin.

You say, “How can I be set free, Rich?”

#1 – Come before God and get honest about yourself and your slavery. The Bible calls this confession. Until we face up to whom we are, that we are enslaved, that we have indulged ourselves, that we are imperfect, we constantly live in bondage. We cannot be free. We say, “I am enslaved. Let me be honest here.”

#2 – We come to God relying on Jesus Christ. We don’t rely on ourselves, our performance, our will power, our vows, and our promises to pull ourselves from the flypaper. Jesus Christ is the way. Jesus opens the door to freedom. Jesus opened the way to freedom by dying for us and purchasing us by his blood. We ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit.

#3 – Conclusion.