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Standing Firm

Free Indeed: A Study of the Epistle of Galatians

Galatians 5:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). Very familiar words but I'm not sure we live that way, and I'm not convinced we understand what Jesus meant when He talked about freedom, but I will tell you this: Freedom rightly understood changes everything. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Galatians, Chapter 5.

Paul, for the most part, has completed his theological argument for salvation by grace through faith, and now he is going to move into the outflow—some behaviors. This is how we should live. What I would suggest, he still has a little concern that as soon as he starts talking about behaviors we will turn it into legalism, so I think one more time he is trying to be clear that what he's talking about is the outflow of a life that's changed, not a means of changing life. The last thing he talked about in chapter 4 is: if you believe in salvation by grace through faith alone, if you are people of grace, then you flow out of the free woman—out of Sarah—and, if that's true, then chapter 5 verse 1:

> **It was for freedom that Christ set us free;** (*NASB, Galatians 5:1a)

Now I suppose initially we would say that sounds like something right out of the "duh" file. **It was for freedom that Christ set us free.** Well, duh! But I'm not sure we understand this as clearly as we think we do, and I'll come back to that in just a minute, but because that's true:

> **Therefore** (what?) **keep standing firm.** (Vs. 1b)

It's actually a military term. It's interesting how many military terms are used about living a life of grace. It basically means *to stand firm*. It means to *hold your ground*. The terminology I've used several times in Galatians is, "You have to fight for it," and that's basically what it means. There isn't a single person in this room that is so spiritual the grace life just flows out of you every day. In a performance-based culture, the pressure to live otherwise is so intense and so overwhelming that you have to really get the mindset, "I have to fight for this. If I'm going to live in freedom, I have to fight for it because it is hard."

It's worth noting that the phrase **keep standing firm** is an imperative, meaning it's a command. In other words, as people of grace, we are actually commanded to fight for it, which would mean that legalism is disobedience. This is very helpful to understand because, typically, the legalist is the one portraying himself or herself as the one who is obedient, and everybody that doesn't see it that way, those people are disobedient. But, according to the text, that's the opposite of what's true. It's the legalist that is disobedient, and it is the person of grace that is walking in obedience, and what he's saying is, "This is a command. Fight for it! Live this way."

> **And do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.** (Vs. 1c)

If it's true that grace has kicked the doors of the prison open, if it's true that grace has removed the shackles, if it's true that **it was for freedom that Christ set us free**, why would you willingly choose to put yourself in jail again? Why would you stay there when the doors are open? Why

would you stay there when the shackles are off? Why would you choose to live that way? That's basically the question that he's asking. Why would you **be subject again to a yoke of slavery**?

Now a yoke isn't really an image that we're so familiar with today, but a first century person would have understood this clearly. Just think of a couple of animals in a yoke doing some sort of hard labor. That's the basic idea and so he is referring to this **yoke of slavery**, which is the Law. This is what the Law does to us. It throws us back in prison. It creates this yoke that we have to carry, but interestingly enough this was common language among the Jewish legalists, among the Judaizers, among the Pharisees, among the rabbis, but they actually used it in their minds in a positive sense. They actually referred to taking on the yoke of the Law and meant it in a positive way, that to please God it has to hurt. To please God you have to sacrifice. To please God it has to be miserable, and the more miserable it is, the more pleased God is, so the idea was you take this on as a way of gaining God's favor and, basically, every world religion has the same basic idea. The more you grovel, the more miserable you are, the more pain it inflicts, the more it pleases the gods, and so that's what it's all about.

If you go back and reread the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus actually identifies a number of ways that the Pharisees publicly pretend they're miserable and in pain, thinking that's what impresses God, so that's why Jesus' words were so striking when He said to that culture, "**Come unto Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden. I will give you rest, for My yoke is** (what?) **easy, and My load is light**" (Matthew 11:28). Religious people of the first century had never heard such a concept. It was contrary to everything they had known and been taught.

So he is talking here about a **yoke of slavery** that is from the Law. It's the curse. It's the condemnation. It's the burden. It's the slavery when we choose to live according to legalism based on our personal performance, on our ability to somehow merit favor with God.

One of the words in this verse that we might skip over without much thought would be the word **again**. But it *is* worth noting. These are not Jewish legalists. These are not Jewish people. Primarily the Galatians were Gentiles—they were Greeks. They were not steeped in Jewish religion. They were up to their eyebrows in pagan idolatry, so it's very interesting that he is saying to them, "Do not subject yourself again to the slavery that came from your pagan idolatry."

In essence what he's saying is: there is no difference between Jewish moralism or pagan idolatry. At the end of the day, they end up in the same place. They both lead you to bondage. They both become a yoke of slavery, so it's important to understand that. He was ultimately saying whichever way you go you end up in the same place. It's just legalism! So let's go back to the beginning of the verse.

> **It was for freedom that Christ set us free.** (Vs. 1a)

So what does he mean by freedom? I think many, many Christians would understand this as freedom from sin, and that sounds very good, but this is the problem. Someone like me says, "The truth will set you free," and you're excited and you walk out that door thinking, "I've been set free," but tomorrow you crash and burn. Tomorrow you sin. Tomorrow you offend God. Tomorrow you make a mess of things, and there is a reality to this that says, "You know, I'm really not free. It's not working for me," and so you start to think, "Maybe it just doesn't work. Maybe it's just not really true. Maybe for whatever reasons, I'm a loser Christian, and I'll never figure this out because the fact of the matter is: no matter how many times you say it, Preacher, it doesn't work. I don't live my

life free from sin." So every time someone like me stands here and talks about freedom, it's as if it just leads you into deeper despair because, in your own world, you know that's really not true.

This is the theology that gets you stuck in the *Dark Room* because now it's about shame. Now it's about guilt. Now it's about despair. Now it's about disappointment, and you conclude in your mind, "For what ever reason, this doesn't work for me, and I'm a loser Christian, and that's all I'll ever be," and as long as you're thinking that, there's no way out of that *Dark Room*, and the core problem is you have misunderstood the statement.

The bondage is what? The **yoke of slavery** is the slavery that comes from the Law. It is the curse of the Law. It is the condemnation of the Law. It throws you in prison. Paul has told us this several times in the book of Galatians. Therefore, if that's true, what would freedom be? Freedom would be freedom from condemnation, freedom from the curse of the Law, freedom from living with this oppressive judgment, and that freedom is not based on your ability to perform today. It's based on the finished work of Jesus on the cross, so understand it this way: On your best days and especially on your worst days when you mess up, when you sin, when you offend God, and you are grieved in your heart, and you feel like you've blown it again, you have to understand, you have to fight for it in this moment. "I thank God I'm not condemned anymore. I'm not under the curse of the Law anymore. God doesn't hold this sin against me anymore, but actually because of what Jesus has done for me, I'm free. I am righteous. I'm justified. I'm accepted. I'm loved."

This is the theology that gets us to the *Light Room* and on my worst days, because I know that my freedom is not based on my performance, it's based on the finished work of Christ. Therefore, on the days when I'm miserable and I've blown it, I still rejoice in the fact that I'm still free. I'm not condemned. I'm justified. I'm not under the curse. I've been set free and so I run to the *Light Room*, and there God loves me and He accepts me and He forgives me and He declares me to be righteous, and I start to hear the music of *Amazing Grace*, and I start to dance again, and my soul comes back to life, and I remember in those moments what's true. It's in the light where confession takes place. It's in the light where repentance takes place.

In the *Dark Room*, there is not confession. There is not repentance. You just start to spiral deeper and deeper and deeper, and you rationalize and you make excuses and you distance yourself from God, and you convince yourself, "I'm loser Christian," and nothing good ever comes of that. If you fight for the freedom that is yours in Christ, I promise you it changes everything on your best days and especially on your worst days, and I'm telling you, if you get this and you run to the *Light Room*, it will dramatically change your behavior. That's what he means by freedom. Verse 2:

> **Behold** (It's a pretty expressive Greek word. We would say something like, "Hey, listen up! This is really important." That's kind of the word there.) **I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.**

I think throughout Galatians it's been fairly obvious that he has been speaking to a mixed audience. Sometimes he talks about those who are true believers. Sometimes he talks to those who are the legalists (we saw that in chapter 4, verse 21), and sometimes he talks to those who are still on the fence, who are still trying to figure out what's true, and in this paragraph he's talking to those on the fence. He says to them that **if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.** In other words, they are still trying to think what the basis of justification is. Now these are Gentiles. They've never been circumcised, and there's absolutely no reason to be circumcised unless the Judaizers have convinced them that's necessary to be justified. That's what Paul is saying.

Again, the issue is not the issue. Circumcision is only an illustration of the issue. The issue is whether or not you think there is some other ritual, there is some other religious thing, there's some other performance I need to do in order to be justified. They are trying to figure this out, and what he says is: if you choose circumcision, what you've chosen is the Law and, if you've chosen the Law, then Christ is of no benefit to you. Again and again he has said you can't blend the two systems. You can't have a little Jesus and a little law. You gotta make a decision. It's one or the other. Verse 3:

> **And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.**

It's a very helpful verse because what he's saying is that circumcision isn't enough. In other words, who gave the Judaizers permission to cherry-pick a handful of things from the Law? The arrangement is either it's grace or law. This is a huge problem in Christian circles because there are so many denominations that just go back and cherry-pick a few things from the law and say, "You know, we're into the Jesus thing. We like Christmas. We like Easter. We agree with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and we think all that's great, but we have to cherry-pick a handful of things from the Old Testament Law or things that are some sort of performance in order to finish the job," and what Paul is saying is, "Who gave you permission to do that?" It's actually all or nothing. It has always been all or nothing. Either you keep the entire Law perfectly all the time or it's grace. You can't just cherry-pick a handful of things to add. Again, you can't mix the two. You can't say, "Well, this is about Jesus and death, burial, and resurrection, and we're really into that, but we've added two or three things." He's saying it doesn't work that way. Verse 4:

> **You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law** (that's salvation); **you have fallen from grace.**

They are **severed from Christ** if they have decided that the way to be justified is by the Law. They are saying it's on the basis of the Law. It's on the basis of my performance. Therefore, it's not on the basis of Christ. You can't have it both ways, so if you choose to be circumcised, you've made your decision. It's law, and **you've been severed from Christ.** Therefore, **you have fallen from grace.**

So what does that mean? There's a lot of discussion around that phrase **fallen from grace**. First of all, it's the only time in the Bible the phrase is used, so we have no other context, so we have to figure it out here, which in some ways is helpful. Now some would say, "Well, I think it's a reference to the fact that you can lose your salvation." Well, let's think about that for a minute. First of all, if that's your interpretation, what you're saying is: what causes you to lose your salvation is not that you've been bad. It's that you've been really good. In other words, what it's saying is: legalism is what has caused you to fall from grace. I don't know anyone that takes that position, but that is what the text would be saying, but I don't think **fallen from grace** is referring to that.

Now if you go back and read the Galatians transcripts from ten years ago, I took the position that it's the grace principle. That's a very common interpretation in our circles. Basically it's the idea that these are believers, but they've reverted back to law. Therefore, even though they're saved, they don't really live in the freedom of grace. They've fallen from the grace principal. But now ten years later, I would suggest to you I was wrong. I've changed my mind. Shocking, isn't it? (laughter) It just doesn't do justice to the language of the text. I think it's abundantly clear he is talking about salvation. He just said it. If you believe you can be justified on the basis of the Law (that's salvation) then **you've been severed from Christ, and you've fallen from grace**. In other words,

you're on the fence, and you're still trying to decide: is it law or grace? If you choose law, you've fallen from grace. You can't have it both ways. That's to me what makes the most sense, and that becomes very clear in the verse that follows.

> **For we** (Now notice that the previous paragraph was **you**—you who are still riding the fence, you who are still trying to figure it out—but then he moves to **we**, those of us that are the people of grace, those of us that have believed)
>
> **For we** (how?) **through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.**
> (Vs. 5)

In other words he's saying, "This is our future, and our future is spectacular." The idea of waiting is future tense. It hasn't happened yet. It's the **hope of righteousness**. It's confusing when you read the word **hope** in our English translations because our understanding of hope really doesn't line up at all with the biblical understanding of hope. It's just hard to figure out what other word to use. We say, "I hope it's warm tomorrow," but the biblical term is always future and it's always guaranteed... always future, always guaranteed! It's never like, "I sure hope so!" But, "It's our hope. It's the promise. It's what we claim," so we're waiting for the **hope of righteousness**, which means the fulfillment of our righteousness, the completion of our salvation. This is our hope.

How is it possible? **Through the Spirit, by faith**, which is contrasted with salvation on the basis of the Law. There is just simply no way that Paul would have said out of one side of his mouth, "By the way, if you mess up, you're going to lose your salvation and fall from grace," and turn right around and say, "But we have this awesome hope that's guaranteed in Christ." There's just no way, so what he is saying is: if you choose law, then you've fallen from grace, but if you choose grace **through the Spirit, by faith**, this is our future. This is our guarantee.

The idea of the **hope of righteousness** can be best understood by going back to the diagram that we used last fall. The moment you trust Christ as Savior, you are justified. You are made righteous. You are acceptable. You are holy in the presence of God. There will never be a time where you will be more justified or more righteous or more acceptable to God because you stand in the righteousness of Christ. It can't get any more righteous than that, but there is the reality that I don't always live that way and so there's a gap between what's true and how I live. And the essence of discipleship is seeking to close that gap and, basically, the more I understand and choose to believe and fight for what is true, the more I close the gap and the more how I live seems to line up with what is true. And the promise is: one day God will finish what He started. One day those lines will come together, and my salvation will be completed, and that is what will define me in the new heaven and the new earth forever. So our hope is spectacular even though sometimes now I just blow it and make a mess of things. That's the essence of what he is saying: All made possible on the basis of grace **through the Spirit, by faith**. Verse 6:

> **For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.**

That phrase **faith working through love** I think is his way of one more time reminding us that what is to follow, talking about behavior, is not a means of salvation. Let's not turn it into legalism, but this is the outflow of a life of faith. This is the life that now flows out of us because of what Christ has done for us, and we'll talk about those things in the next several weeks.

I want to talk for just a minute about that interesting statement **neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything**. In other words, whether you're a Jewish moralist or whether you're a pagan idolater, neither one merits you any more or less favor with God. At the end of the day, they're the same thing, and neither of them works, and both of them cause you to end up in bondage and slavery, which provides a little bit of a platform for me to define how I use the word *religion*. I am very aware of *Webster's* definition. I get that, and by *Webster's* definition you would have various religions. You would have Christianity. So think of this under an umbrella. You have Christianity. You have Islam. You have Buddhism. You have Hinduism. Those are all these umbrellas and, according to *Webster's Dictionary*, that's how they play out. I get that, and under that definition, they're all religions, but just a couple of comments here.

First of all, that is a manmade definition, and language is always evolving. Language is never static. Dictionaries don't necessarily capture that as much as they just reflect the changing definitions of the culture. It's called etymology. Words evolve, and dictionaries have to catch up. That's the way it works, and I would suggest to you that how most people use the term religion today is not in alignment with *Webster's* definition. But I actually have a deeper problem—it's a theological problem. I would suggest to you the Bible does not define religion the way Webster does, and if you're going to press me, I have to choose God's definition over *Webster's* definition. I think it matters, and let me explain why.

First of all, the Bible does not have real good things to say about religion. It's not a term that's used often and is used consistently for basically manmade stuff to try to gain favor with God. There are a few exceptions. For example, in James, James says, "**This is pure and undefiled religion**" (James 1:27), but you need to understand that Greek word in no way resembles *Webster's* definition. It's a simple word that means the outflow of belief system, and that's exactly how James uses it. "If you're going to say you believe this, then this is how you should live."

I would suggest to you that the Bible defines religion differently, so think about those multiple umbrellas and the different world religions under each one, and let's just pull out Christianity. There would be those that would say, "Well, that's just one of many umbrellas." I would suggest to you that's not the dividing point. It's a huge mistake to think that's the dividing point. Within the umbrella or under the umbrella of Christianity, there is a lot of diversity about what we believe to be true. As a matter of fact, there are different denominations under the umbrella of Christianity, which means it’s about Christ and the cross and death, burial, and resurrection and all of that. We are saying we believe all that, but there's a lot of difference in what we believe to the point that there are those under that umbrella who would say, "We believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, but we also believe you have to do this, this, this, and this to be saved." At that point those people have more in common with the world religions than they do with the gospel of grace.

So I would suggest to you that in God's Word there are only two umbrellas, and this has been abundantly clear in Galatians. There is the umbrella of grace, and there is the umbrella of law, and whether you consider yourself Christian or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist, if you believe on the basis of something you're doing you can merit favor with God, you're all under the same umbrella. That's exactly what he just said. Whether **circumcision or uncircumcision**, whether it's Jewish moralism or whether it's pagan idolatry, if you believe on the basis of your performance you merit favor with God, you're all together. So there are two umbrellas. There are the people of grace and there are people of law, and I would suggest consistently the Bible refers to those under law as people of religion, so it's an important distinction, and it's a distinction clearly made in the text. Verse 7:

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?

He illustrates the grace life as a race. He basically says, "Who cut in your lane? Who cut you off? Who made you stumble?" That's what the word means, and actually what they are causing you to be hindered from is **obeying the truth**. Now I think it's worth reminding ourselves that fighting for grace, running the grace race well, is obedience. That's what he just said, and legalism, it's not safe; it's not conservative; it's just flat disobedience. He said it twice now in this text.

This persuasion *did* not *come* from Him who calls you. (Vs. 8)

That's not coming from God, and we know where it's coming from. He's told us. It's coming from the flesh. It's coming from my arrogance, my desire to be my own god, my wanting to think somehow, someway I've contributed to this salvation. That's where it comes from. Verse 9:

A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*.

This is a very familiar imagery in both the Old and New Testaments. It would have been very common for them, very understandable. You take a little bit of leaven. You put it in a lump of dough, and pretty soon that leaven permeates the whole lump. It doesn't stay as a little bit of leaven. It's infectious. It permeates the whole. Maybe the Galatians were reasoning to themselves, "What's the problem with a little legalism?" And he is saying there's no way to have a little legalism. There are two operating systems. One is grace; one is law, and a little bit of legalism is infectious, and pretty soon it leavens the whole lump, and that is what defines your life, and you find yourself back in jail, back in shackles, back in prison when God wants you to be free. He says:

I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. (Vs. 10)

Basically what he is saying is, "Hey, folks. There are two sides and one wins and one loses, and it's not a guess who's going to win and lose, so why would you side with the side that's going to lose? Why would you choose law when you know, at the end of the day, that team loses? Why wouldn't you choose grace?" Verse 11:

But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.

Apparently the Judaizers were saying, "Hey, even Paul still preaches circumcision," and Paul is saying, "If I was still preaching circumcision (in other words, the Law), why would these Judaizers follow me everywhere I go and make my life miserable? Obviously they are doing that because I don't preach law," and he also says, "If I were preaching law, then why would the cross be so offensive?"

This is really important to understand—that even though highly religious people, even under the umbrella of Christianity, embrace Christmas, embrace Easter, talk about the cross, put crosses on their building, talk about death, burial, and resurrection, when they add this, this, and this that's also necessary, what they've said is: on the basis of your religion, on the basis of your performance, on the basis of your duty, on the basis of how you live your life, you can merit favor with God. They are very offended at the suggestion that's not true. They may not say it, but in their minds they are thinking, "Are you telling me that after 20, 30, 40, 50 years of religious activity, of paying the price,

of being miserable, of trying to impress God through all this religious stuff, you're telling me it doesn't count at all, and it's only Christ and Christ alone?" They find that message offensive. That is the offense of the cross, to realize finally that in brokenness and humility there is nothing I have done; it's all Jesus.

He ends with a rather graphic statement.

> **I wish that those who are troubling you** (meaning the Judaizers) **would even mutilate themselves.** (Vs. 12)

That's actually a rather tame interpretation. The Greek says "castrate themselves." He is saying, "You know, if the Judaizers are going to say circumcision gains God's favor, then why not go all the way? Castrate yourself, and God will really be happy with you." Part of that was because that was what the pagan idolatrous priests did. Again, the more pain, the more misery, the more sacrifice and so they would actually castrate themselves in order to gain the favor of the gods. So Paul logically is saying, "Alright, fellas. If you think circumcision impresses God, you might as well finish the deal and castrate yourself." But what he's also saying is: there simply is no difference whether you are a Jewish moralist clinging to the Law or whether you are a pagan idolater; there is no difference. You are both seeking to gain God's favor on the basis of your performance, and it is contrary to the freedom of grace. "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32)

> **It was for freedom that Christ set you free.** (Vs. 1a)

You have to believe that. You have to fight for that and not only on your best days but especially on your worst days when you mess up, when you sin, when you offend God, when you feel like loser Christian again. It's in those moments you have to fight. You have to fight to believe what's true and to know that even though I was miserable today, thank God I'm no longer under the condemnation of my sin. I am justified. I am no longer under the curse of sin. I am no longer under God's wrath and judgment, but I am justified and I stand in the righteousness of Christ. And I am loved and I am accepted and I am forgiven, and my future is glorious as I wait for the hope of the fulfillment of my righteousness. And when I understand that and I run to the Light, I will find my soul coming back to life as I experience the life that comes from dancing with Jesus to the music of this *Amazing Grace*!

> *Our Father, we are thankful this is true. I think probably every one of us would say it's just hard to believe. It seems too good to be true. God, help us to be people of faith that believe that You tell the truth. Help us to fight for this and not just on our best days but on our worst days to fight for what's true. It was for freedom that You set us free. Lord, may we as Your children daily dance with Jesus to the beautiful music of Amazing Grace. Amen.*

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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Study Questions
Standing Firm
Free Indeed: A Study in the Epistle of Galatians
Galatians 5:1-12

Opening Discussion

1. What is and is not legalism? Are rules? Which rules? Is there an organization or individual that doesn't have either spoken or unspoken rules or convictions? Is that legalism?

2. Can two people be doing the exact same thing outwardly where one is operating out of legalism and one is not? Explain?

3. In your experience, is legalism typically clearly spelled out or more something unspoken but clearly understood or felt in a particular culture?

4. Is it safe or conservative to have a little legalism just in case? Why or why not?

Bible Study

1. Read Galatians 5:1-6: What is the "freedom" Paul is referring to in 5:1? What are believers free from? Is this freedom based on our performance or on what Christ has done for us? Why does this distinction matter?

2. What is the "yoke of slavery?" Compare Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30. Why would the Jewish legalist view the "yoke" as a good and necessary thing? What would be the parallel to this thinking in today's church culture?

3. The phrase, "keep standing firm" is a command. That makes legalism disobedience. Compare with 5:7. Why is this important to understand? Do legalists consider themselves more or less obedient to Christ?

4. What is Paul saying in 5:2-4? What does he mean by "the whole law?" What gives the legalist the authority to cherry pick what laws matter and which ones can be ignored?

5. Is the real distinction between the world religions and Christianity (broadly defined) or between those who believe they are justified by works and those who believe they are justified by grace? In other words, does the legalist under the banner of the "Christian Church" have more in common with pagan religions or with grace-based Christian Churches?

6. According to 5:5 what are true Christians waiting for? What is the basis for this hope?

7. Read 5:7-12. Explain the leaven illustration. Can someone remain just a "little" legalistic? Why or why not?

8. Why does Paul get so graphic in 5:12? How is this similar to your answer in question #5?

Application

1. The key to freedom is in believing what is true. In practical every day terms what does it mean to be set free according to this text?

2. What are some practical ways to continue to "stand firm" against the deceit of legalism?

3. Would you say that you personally are living more in the truth of 5:1, 5 or 5:7? Are you living in freedom or has someone hindered you from running the race?

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