

**Galatians 5:1** It was for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not burden yourselves again with a yoke of slavery.

When I first thought God might want me to share this verse with you, I was a little hesitant because I imagine you probably think about your freedom a lot. I'm sure if Jesus came into this room and asked "If I could give you one thing right now, what would that be?" with the exception of those of us that get to go home tonight to our family and friends, I bet everyone in here would say without hesitation "I want to be free."

And I didn't want to cause any anxiety about that, but the longer I thought about it the more I felt impressed to share it. And the more I felt impressed to share it the more I began to see what beautiful truth this verse holds, because this verse isn't talking about our physical freedom but freedom from being a slave to the sin in our lives.

First I want to make sure you know what a yoke is...do you know that a yoke is a bar that stretches across the shoulders of two animals, often called beasts of burden, and it keeps them together as their working – where one goes the other goes and vice versa? So a yoke of slavery to sin would mean that wherever we go our sin goes, and wherever our sin goes we go ...

Just to be clear sin is anything we do that misses the mark of God's standard in our lives. The Ten Commandments tell us that sin is lying, stealing, adultery and murder to name a few. And Jesus goes a little further by saying that if we even think about doing these things we've sinned. So it's easy to see that we've all been slaves to sin. I remember the day that I realized I was a slave to sin.

I had been a pretty good girl growing up in a family whose only expectation of me was that I would grow up to be a wife and a mother. That was also a true desire of my heart from the time I was 7. We weren't a church family but my mom occasionally sent us to Sunday School with some neighbors or friends and I remember being a small girl looking up at a picture of Jesus on the cross and crying uncontrollably because it didn't seem right that someone without any sin in their life should die for the sins of the rest of the world.

But no one told me he did that for me and that emotion was soon forgotten as I made my way in the world, looking for a husband. With little guidance from my family I had few standards of my own, except maybe Mr. Right or Love-at-First-Sight.

Man #1 came without a wedding ring but a cozy apartment. He was an alcoholic. Unfortunately Man #1 also came with an unplanned pregnancy which ended our relationship and I delivered my twin sons prematurely, much too early to live longer than a day for one son, my other son lived 8 months entirely dependent on life support. This was my first awakening that my poor choices were having a serious effect on my life.

Man #2 did come with a wedding ring – finally! But he also came with a temper. Even though we had two beautiful daughters, went to church, and had a lovely little home, life was far from perfect. He was an alcoholic. He knew that the one thing I would never stand for in marriage was being hit, and when our daughters were 1 and 3, he hit me in the head during an argument. I don't know if he was daring me to leave or I provoked him to hit me but it was all I needed and now I found myself as a single mom. You'd think that I would have learned to slow down and make better decisions, but there was this man ...

Man #3 had a heart to take care of strays ... dogs, birds, goats... it was people he wasn't so good with. He wasn't abusive in any way which is probably why I was attracted to him. But guess what...he was an alcoholic. I think deep down he truly loved me, but there was a lot of dysfunction in his family and he had no idea how to express it. He also carried the weight of never having made peace with some of the things he'd done in his life. He just couldn't bring himself to marry me, so we lived together, with my young daughters.

Long story short, his alcoholism evolved into a serious drug addiction and he eventually went into treatment. While he was gone I just knew that he would come back healed and life would miraculously change for the better. But his absence was excruciating, so one day I dusted off the Bible I kept in my nightstand and began to seek comfort in a place I'd never really given much thought to before.

You know the saying the truth will set you free? Turns out, that's actually in the Bible. Turns out, it's true. But before it set me free, it showed me where I was a slave to sin. There's a little story in the gospel of John, chapter 4. (Read verses 7-10, 11-18)

When I read those words: the one you have now is not your husband – my heart broke. All my life I knew that there was a God who cared about right and wrong, I mean I knew about Jesus and the cross. I also knew I felt bad when I did wrong, but I also felt shame and didn't know what to do with that.

The mess I called my life hadn't just been the result of less than perfect circumstances. It was that I was more concerned with getting a man than doing what was good. I knew then that I needed to get my heart right with God. My boyfriend heard in treatment that he needed to get rid of his old friends and habits in order to be successful and wasn't sure he wanted our relationship anymore. On the other hand, I told him that if we weren't headed toward marriage then it was time to move on. I ended up moving out.

A few weeks later I was sitting in church while two families who were moving away were being prayed over. I couldn't believe the wonderful things people were saying about these families. Tears of regret and cleansing washed over me as I thought, "If I had stayed with #3, no one would ever have said those nice things about us." I prayed right then that if the Lord would send a man to be a family with me and my daughters I would love & serve Him all the days of my life. I also told Him that I was not in any hurry and I would be content to wait for His time.

Several weeks after that when #4 was pursuing me against my hopes and desires to get to know the Lord better, I realized that in fact God was calling me to marry this man. It was a good sign that I was scared out of my mind, and once and for all I knelt down and admitted what a slave to sin I'd been. I asked for God's forgiveness, and I promised to turn my will toward God's plans for me. I felt a peace and a freedom that I had never in my life known. My husband Howie and I have been married for 15 years now.

If we're totally honest with one another, you know a little something about being a slave to sin – am I right? Here's the thing though, for all of us, you and me, when we did things that we thought were going to free us from our circumstances we actually became slaves to our sin, weighed down in them with guilt and shame – I don't know what you did, but I used men to validate me and when they didn't meet my expectations, I left or divorced them. Not once did that make me feel truly free. Do you feel free today? If not you're probably a slave to your sin. Oh how I wish for you to know the peace of asking for Christ's freedom!

And here's the beauty of our verse, you can. It was for freedom that Christ came to set us free. Just as I felt peace when I asked God's forgiveness, not merely being sorry I'd gotten caught in my sin, but truly repentant which just means turning around and going God's way, you too can be at peace with God right here in this place.

The one thing that word freedom doesn't mean is freedom from the consequences of our sin. My daughters grew up with divorced parents and all the baggage that comes with that. Even though my husband and I have been married for 15 years, and I still know the peace of Christ in my heart, life and marriage aren't really any easier than they ever were and when I face similar challenges today I sometimes treat my husband as though he were one of those other men...heaven help me.

That's why in this verse we get an encouragement and a warning. Stand firm therefore...in this freedom that Christ has given you ... Do not burden yourselves again with a yoke of slavery. When I was first considering this verse I admit that I got a little prideful (also a sin) thinking that I hadn't returned to my yoke of slavery. But this verse says 'A' yoke of slavery. It's not necessarily the same yoke. Often we have a tendency to pick up a new yoke. We start playing the blame game, or we refuse to believe that God has truly forgiven us for our particular sin. Pretty soon we are just as weighed down as we were before Christ set us free.

Recently God showed me a new yoke of self-validating behavior that's crept up on me. Of course being the good Christian wife that I am these days, it wouldn't do for me to go down to the tavern and pick up a man when I think I need validation. I love my husband too much. I'm not burdened by that yoke of slavery anymore. You probably can't tell by my girlish figure that my new yoke is food issues.

Lately I have come to realize that I sometimes use food in my life for comfort in those times of stress when I refuse to get a new man and I don't want to treat my husband in an ungodly way. Instead of turning to God for comfort or wisdom, I often turn to food. But God is teaching me to turn to prayer and His word. I'd like to share a few verses I found this week:

1 Peter 5:7                Cast all your anxiety on Him for He cares for you

Psalms 119:50            This is the comfort in my affliction, your word has revived me.

Matthew 11:28-30        "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.

"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Oh, now there's the yoke to carry – right alongside the Lord Jesus where we find rest and peace for our souls. Where Jesus goes we go and where we go Jesus goes. It's about Jesus. So stand firm, precious ladies, don't be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Take on His yoke which is light and walk in His freedom!