

Living Our Freedom Well

Review

Last Sunday I presented a sermon that in many ways was fit for today - 4th of July. I spoke of Paul's words on Christian freedom. Remember, he said, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence..." He teaches us that our freedom, apart from God, easily degenerates into license; that is, we easily slip into indulging our own preferences and desires. Without God to set a standard for living what we consider to be a "good person" will easily be swayed by the spirit of the times, or the spirit of selfishness, rather than the Holy Spirit. And even the redeemed of the Lord, though they are on the way toward perfection in God's grace, are still liable to fall into sin.

I also spoke of how freedom in Christ connects with our nation's founding and the liberty we enjoy in this country. The founders of this nation were convinced (as am I) that a society that gave much freedom to individuals would only work well if a majority of the citizens were virtuous and aspired to virtue. They recognized how important "religion" was in the lives of people and the health of the nation. Christianity calls people to a life in Christ; a life that can lead people to a more nearly angelic character, and at a minimum, turn them away from their selfish and sinful natures. A virtuous and free citizenry can do more good for more people, than a citizenry that must be forced by king or government to do "good." However, freedom could be abused. George Washington observed, "Arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of liberty abused to licentiousness."¹ It seems these men understood what Paul had written: true freedom is found in the virtue which Christ's Spirit can impart; and the abuse of freedom to indulge selfish passions is a false freedom that only leads to bondage again. Our freedom in Christ, as well as our freedom in this nation, must be guarded and preserved and can be lost if we are not vigilant.

This week we conclude our reflections on Paul's letter to the Galatians with some further observations about what it means to live in the freedom found in Christ.

In a Spirit of a Gentleness

It so happens – and it has happened throughout church history - that Christians fall into temptation and sin. Even after committing themselves to Christ, even after baptism and new life in Christ, Christian people may fall from grace. What is to be done? This question was probably on the minds of some or many of the Christians to whom Paul wrote in Galatians. He advised them, "My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted."

At one church, there was a woman who had a very negative attitude. She was on our Finance Committee. She was negative about finances, about the church, about her work, about her husband, about herself. So, we on the Committee, decided not to argue with her, but to surround all her negative statements with positive statements on the same subject. After several months of this she began to slowly change her tune. I am not sure how much impact it had on her life, but it sure made our Finance Committee meetings go a lot better.

At another church... a young couple attending, not married, but pregnant with their second child. Another man in the church asked me if I'd talk with them – he was quite uncomfortable with the situation. So I asked the couple if we could talk... had them over to dinner in our home... counseled about marriage... her drinking problems... his past...they attended church's family retreat... in time they began to heal, they got married, and began a stable family life.

How do we go about restoring one another to life in Christ? We do not live by the law, but by God's grace that we know in Jesus. Paul says restore them in gentleness. He uses the very same word here (πραυτες) that he used earlier to describe the fruit of the Spirit; and our aim is to live by the Spirit so that the fruit of the Spirit will grow in the church. Throughout the church's history, in different areas, there have been various approaches to restoring fallen Christians to grace; sometimes there was a period of shunning, or

¹George Washington, Circular to the States, May 9, 1753.

excommunication. But I suppose the best practice happened in those churches where the members knew themselves to be a part of the family; and so, when one fell into temptation, he/she had “family members” in the faith to pray for and with them, and offer forgiveness when the time came. It’s not just up to the pastor to deal with church discipline. We’re all in this together. I know it’s not easy and takes time. In such a church, I imagine, all the members would regularly confess their sin and receive forgiveness and be restored to Christ’s grace. (What often happens today is that a Christian who transgresses in a serious way drops out of church or goes to another church, and so forgiveness and restoration never take place.)

In our Christian fellowship we are to live by grace, not law. We are not in a position to impose sanctions on one another, but to pray and talk with people, make suggestions and surround them not only with love and compassion, but also with our own example of godly living. We know that when we commit our lives to Christ we may find ourselves desiring to exhibit the fruit of the spirit in our living, but in our humanness we may fall back to the works of the flesh. That is why we need confession, both public and private. That is why we must pray about everything we do in this church. That is why we must continually pray for one another.

Paul also warns us that as we help those who fall into temptation and stray from the life of the Spirit we must take care not to fall into temptation ourselves. Because we do not like to bring up uncomfortable topics with friends or among church members, we often avoid talking about, let alone pointing out, the sins or temptations one or many of us have fallen into. Many in the church are prone to falling into the practices that may be widespread in the culture but contrary to the instruction of Scripture. It is a temptation to just let things slide; just avoid it altogether. This is why some ungodly behaviors go on for long periods in our churches or among our members. We can also be tempted to think that gentleness means to only encourage someone, and never point out error. This only makes us enablers of sinful living. Here are more reasons to always turn to God in prayer lest we fall into these temptations.

You Reap What You Sow

“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow...” Remember that Paul said, “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy drunkenness, carousing, and things like these....those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” If you’re involved in a lifestyle filled with these things, you may be able to hide it from others... maybe you can look good on Sunday; maybe you can fool yourself. But God sees all and isn’t fooled by anyone. If we continue to sow seeds of our own making, rather than God’s, we will reap a harvest of weeds and chaff. The consequence of ignoring the Spirit of God in our living, the consequence of abusing our freedom, is broken community and broken lives. And this will not lead one to the kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, we can do our part to sow the seeds of God’s kingdom: in our own lives, among ourselves in this congregation, in our nation, and beyond. When we sow the seeds of God’s kingdom, the “fruit of the Spirit” - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – can grow. Clearly those are virtues on which to successfully build a congregation and a nation.

“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.” This verse has been printed and mounted on the inside of my office closet for decades. It reminds me that God has called me to keep on preaching the gospel and leading people to Christ, even when I don’t feel like it, or when it seems that nothing will come of my efforts. Some of you may share my feelings and wonder if your Christian faith does any good for you, your family, or any one else. I like the story of the church member who said to another, “I don’t see why I should listen to any of the pastor’s sermons. I can’t remember a single title, or quote, or anything from all the sermons I’ve sat through.”

The other church member replied, “My wife has been serving me meals for as long as we’ve been married. For the life of me, I cannot remember the menu from any of those meals, but I know I have been nourished by every one, and all those meals have made me healthy and strong.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, English, romantic poet, and his friends were once talking on the subject of religious instruction. One friend maintained that religion should *not* be instilled in children, but that the mind should be left to itself upon that subject, and in mature years it would of itself, assume the right direction.

After dinner Coleridge walked with this friend into his garden and showed him a spot full of nothing but mustard plants. "There," said Coleridge "is a fine flower garden."

"Flower garden!" says his friend, "why they are all mustard plants!"

"I know that," said Coleridge, "but after a while, somehow or other, the mustard will be all rooted out, and we shall have a splendid variety of cultivated flowers." He said the garden should be left to make up its own mind. His friend understood his point.

So, what seeds have you been sowing in your life, in your family, and all around you? Have you grown weary in planting the seeds of the fruit of the spirit? Does your week include Bible study, prayer, and acts of service in God's name? How much do you feed your spirit with Christ's nourishment?

[Pythagoras was a Greek mathematician and philosopher who lived between 580-520 BC. He founded a school in Croton, which made outstanding contributions to the field of mathematics. He is famous for his study of sound and his theorem relating the lengths of the sides of a right triangle. He intensely studied the world around him and came up with some of the most astute observations about the structure of the universe.

Pythagoras' philosophy is considered mystical. However, he did emphasize to his students a principle that is applicable to Christians, the principle of self-examination. Though Pythagoras would use his own conscience as his standard for measurement, Christians can look to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

These are the questions Pythagoras demanded that his students reflect upon each night to measure their progress that day:

"How did I succeed in my studies today?"

"Could I have learned more?"

"Could I have studied better?"

"Is there something I neglected?"

In light of scripture, we can ask, "How did I do in following Christ?" "Could I have learned more?" "Could I have done better?" and "Is there something the Lord would have me do that I have neglected?"]

Between Two Flags

Christians in America, or any country, stand between two flags... they represent our loyalty to Christ and our loyalty to nation. We are truly fortunate that we enjoy much liberty in this nation, including the liberty to live out our commitment to Christ. We are fortunate to live in a nation that recognizes liberty as a gift of God. For this we should thank God; yet never take our freedom for granted. Christians are to be models of freedom; a freedom we find in Christ; and a freedom not to be abused. One virtue of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. Let us always pray for our nation and its leaders, that we, they, and everyone may lead virtuous lives. But bottom line...

"May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." That is our aspiration, and as Paul says, nothing else really matters. Christ took with him to the cross all our sin, and *it* was killed there. It doesn't matter who you are; he did it for you. It doesn't matter what country you're from, or what lifestyle you have been living. When you come to him he takes your sin away and gives you a new start; you're free and it's like being a new creation. Then he gives you power to live out that freedom in ways that lead to true life and life eternal.

Christ gives us the independence to be freely faithful.